

# Exploring Gender Identity and Discrimination in Digital Age

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## ABSTRACT

Digital age has an enormous landscape of thoughts and studies, and its boundaries are expanded to explore more unvoiced topics too. Accordingly gender studies have taken a major form in this enduring digital age. Digital media and other digital platforms have shaken hands for both amplified opportunities as well as deterioration of traditional gender norms of the society. This paper directly expresses the deed of digital technologies shaping the gender identities; voice the voiceless, gender equality of women and visibility of newbie communities like LGBTQ. And also it particularly addresses the challenges of generational understanding of sexuality and gender. Focus is not only lighted up in these aspects but it also focuses on the theories like queer theory, feminist theory and many other theories that stand as a dominant theme of gender studies.

Gender studies also has its own dark side such as digital harassment, gendered digital divides, digital violence and threatening, sometimes freedom of speech can also extend to a shoddier reputation. Even though opportunities are created to express gender, to create connection and also activism of both the gender, it has also created many new-fangled forms of discrimination that gambol the eyes of a common living-being. Women, transgender and marginalised communities are the most common groups that witness discrimination in digital age. To address and resolve these problems we need a combination of change in people's thinking as well as policies of the tech creators.

**Key words:** digital age, gender, discrimination, marginalised communities, technology.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent days the evolution of technologies has transformed every aspect of human life from

communication to commerce. When talking about digital age, the perceptions of gender identity and gender discrimination have evolved and went through a lot of changes. Predominantly, gender

identity has undergone a sea of changes beyond its binary definition in this digital era. From the form of rigidity the definition and even its use has gone miles away as fluid form of understanding. Traditionally, gender identity is confined to two binary aspects, and that is male and female. So as we witness through ages it is based on a child's biological sex since birth. However in the digital era the thin line between male and female is blurred, as new platforms offer space for expression of gender in different ways.

Social media, online communities, and other platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram offer stage for marginalised gender groups, including transgender, nonconforming individuals, to find support among other citizens. But these digital platforms that supported people also includes harassment, cyber bullying, and posts on hatred speech based on their gender identity particularly targeting them. Furthermore, the algorithm that administers social media and search engine prefer sensitive contents so, it prioritize content that reinforces binary gender norms.

This paper explores the complex relationship between gender identity and discrimination in digital age. Both these topics are sensitive and create a huge impact on society both on its pro and con side. By examining the ways in which digital technology helps in expression of gender as well as how it ties the throat of an individual to articulate their true identity. It also expresses the challenges faced by an individual navigating gender identity in the digital age. The discuss will address the role of digital age in the field of this gender biased world, it also explores challenges of each and every individual who are entirely pushed out of the world channel because of their gender identity.

Hari Nef is a Model, Actress and Activist she has expressed her thoughts on gender identity in digital age "The digital age is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it allows for greater connection and visibility, but it also amplifies the hate and prejudice that

marginalized communities face, especially trans and non-binary people" (Gender Identity, Visibility and Hate speech in digital age: The Struggle for Safe Online Spaces). These lines very well suit the digital era and its situation handling on gender and its identity. She has very well explained the advantages and disadvantages as double edged sword that could probably hurt the both side. She states that though it allows for greater connection and visibility it does not only shake hands for the single side that support all these gender equality but also the one who oppose them.

## II. IMPORTANCE OF GENDER STUDIES IN DIGITAL AGE

Representing gender in digital media plays a prominent role in shaping societal perceptions of gender and their norms. Gender scholars examine how digital platforms can help raise awareness on gender discrimination, normalizing transgender and mobilizing global movements for gender equality. For example it may speak about how black women experiences digital racism in conjunction with sexism. It encompasses the way that in which digital technologies enable crusading. From #Meetoo movement which is really considered as one of the greatest movement that greatly helped women bring out the darker secrets of their sexual life including harassment in various ways. LGBTQ another important community that published its wing of knowledge and rights through a powerful tool baptised internet.

The digital era and internet no only supported but also raised awareness about this gender-biased issue internationally. The impact created on gender and its identity is aid to place in an extensive landscape. Under gender studies, it explores how education, politics, workplace and even entertainment have rules framed based on gender. Fostering social change under gender equality equips individuals with knowledge and tools which stands as a major shaper

of gender inequality. In this digital age though people has got enough freedom to speak about the real face their gender has there is also freedom given to people who oppose it. And thus it is important for every citizen to know about different gender for future generation and give a peaceful future for gender-biased people around the world.

### III. GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

According to world studies women in developing countries is less likely to use the internet compared to men, and thus here comes in topic of discrimination. In most of the developing countries there is a presence of men dominance because they are the one to earn in the family as women are restricted to seek job. So it limits women's ability to benefit from digital tools, online education, online entertainment and e-commerce as well. In tech industries women, to be more particular women of colour is under paid compared to men as a result the decision making authority stays with men that does not take into account of other genders and their feelings. To the point there is a lack of gender equality and diversity in tech development.

As a result the products or the services provided may unintentionally be a gender-biased one or it may neglect certain group of people of the society. Gender representation and stereotyping is one of the issues that are to be concentrated in the recent era. For instance industries like gaming, technology, and social platforms like media women are always understated even in designing and programming. Female characters in a game is sexually characterised or often denied leading role and given a secondary role can easily teach gender inequality among youngsters who play the game.

Most common form of gender discrimination online is harassment and abuse. Women, particularly who combat against or on some kind of social issues are targeted for hate speech on online platforms. The

comment section has the worst sexist comments ever, when reading them female are most targeted audience without any reason as well. Social media is the breeding ground of gender discrimination. Gender-biased violence, trolling, body shaming, discouraging women for general participation in digital platform are some of the major discrimination faced by women. On the other hand, LGBTQ is another community that is been both empowering and challenging in the digital age. It supports individuals who do not have access to LGBTQ+ friendly environments particularly in rural areas. Than any other communities LGBTQ+ individuals faces lot of challenge in digital platform. Transgender frequently encounter discrimination that misidentifies them or excluding them because of their gender. There are many platforms that fail to represent them and common respect is being denied.

### IV. THEORIES

Gender-related theories will give us a keen understanding of the interconnectivity of gender and technology in the digital world. They provide us with proper tools to analyse how people showcase their identities and other gender inequality challenges. Even though we are living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century women and many other marginalised people in society are struggling to voice out their needs. Some theories like the feminist theory and queer theory elucidate the hardships faced by the certain group of people and also help them to find their equality in this biased society. By seeing gender through different theories, we come to know about various opportunities and challenges that technology conveys.

**Feminist theory:** This theory focuses on gender inequality caused by societal norms and the mind-set of the people. As we relate feminist theory to the digital platform, we can find how biased norms and the dominance of the other gender are oppressing women and other marginalized communities. Concepts like intersectionality focus on how different aspects of identity (e.g. Race, sexuality) combine to

provide distinctive discriminations. Women with fair skin tones are prone to more online harassment than those with dusky skin tones. Digital media provides the space for women to voice out their pains and struggles, fight against stereotypes, and organise moments like #Metoo to create awareness for their women's community. Digital media helps to spread information globally and brings visibility to the ideas of women's empowerment which are been ignored and suppressed by the dominant society. On the other side, feminist theory also expresses the darker side of technology. Women and LGBTQ society often face criticism and online harassment which stops them from actively participating in digital platforms and reduces their confidence to voice out their thoughts.

**Queer theory:** Queer theory talks about the gender and sexuality by rejecting the fixed gender of male and female or heterosexuality or homosexuality. It says that the divisions in genders are not fixed and it can be changed due to many personal experiences and cultural changes. People find it so difficult to expose their original identity as they are afraid of the responses that they encounter after the reveal. Digital platform helps individuals to connect with other people in their community and build more awareness by sharing their experiences to embrace who they are. Digital platforms by breaking the norms allow people to link with others beyond the traditional genders. Queer theory recommends online spaces allow people to portray themselves using different unique avatars and emojis. Digital media has made it easier to spread their ideas and campaigns through stories and hash tags. Queer theory critiques the technology as it declines the reach of the queer community and only focuses on heterosexual relationships. Queer contents are sometimes censored by the digital algorithms stopping them from reaching a wide range of audience. On the contrary of all the goods that technology gives, people also face criticism and bullying on the darker side.

Giovanni's Room is one of the best works of James Baldwin which sets example to know about queer

theory and difficulty of acceptance of the protagonist's true gender identity. "I am not homosexual. I am not. I am not", "I know that I am not afraid of life, I am only afraid of what people will say", these lines express the emotion of the protagonist, David. Who is actually a homosexual person but denies it by himself because of social expectations from a male. It critically explains how a male struggles to express his own gender because of the society's expectations.

**Critical theory:** Critical theory examines how one division of society possesses more power over the other division, information, resources, and opportunities. In technology, we can find this in how certain algorithms and online spaces give more importance to the dominant groups (e.g. males) than the other groups (e.g. females). Critical theory also points out how women are been unpaid for the online jobs they do and are given the respect that they deserve.

In One Dimensional Man, by Herbert Marcuse speaks how technology and mass media are always manipulated to promote conformity, distract individuals from questioning the status and also about existing power structures. The concept of Critical theory is very well exposed and explained in One Dimensional Man.

## V. EVOLVING FUTURE OF GENDER STUDIES

As people around the globe started becoming aware of the social trends, their understanding of gender is also becoming profound. People started accepting other's perspectives on newbie communities and genders. Back in the day, people viewed gender from only two perspectives (male and female) setting traditional norms for them to follow. But later, as people started to explore the world and get new understandings they started identifying new gender perspectives. The queer community people used the digital platforms as a medium to convey their views and opinions to gain the support of other communities. And luckily people

started accepting them and gave them the respect they deserved in society. Unlike before, people have begun to support and stand by the queer communities by participating in the online campaigns and pride events. In the future, gender identity will no longer revolve around traditional biological and cultural limitations. Gender identity will be identified mostly based on self-awareness and from the impact of the attitude of society. The technology provides a vast possibility for the acceptance of the queer community for gender exploration and stands as a medium to express their freedom.

#### **VI.LEGAL AND COMMUNITY ACCEPTANCE**

In the future, as people start to grow in mind-sets, the government may provide proper recognition for the queer community people. A separate column for the non-binary gender in the forms is expected. These changes make the lives of the non-binary genders easier and give them the confidence to come out of their shells. Social media may add another gender option for them to select and allow them to proudly use the app using their own identities. Online harassment is a major issue that the marginalised group faces and now these issues are not given much importance. It is expected that the guidelines and the penalties will be properly arranged in the future.

#### **VII.VIRTUAL AND AUGMENTED REALITY FOR GENDER IDENTIFICATION**

Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) platforms allow the user to customise the avatars according to their genders and also create a safe atmosphere to express them freely without the fear of being judged. Even future game platforms may afford the possibility of creating a character without following the traditional gender rules. This normalization of fluid communities may change the perspectives and mind-sets of the people.

#### **VIII. CONCLUSION**

The digital age has been a boon and a bane in shaping and redefining gender identities. It provided multiple platforms for the marginalised communities to voice out their queries and helped them to connect with other people in their communities. The digital age has helped them to reach out globally in a short period by conducting events and campaigns.

But on the other side, people face so many hardships to survive in this digital world. As the technology has provided a great space for them to voice out, it also exposed them to a variety of new discriminations, cyber bullying, and harassment. We look forward to hoping that the future provides them with a safe environment and non-biased algorithms. The journey of gender equality and gender identity is on-going and technology remains as a connection to understanding and inclusivity.

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