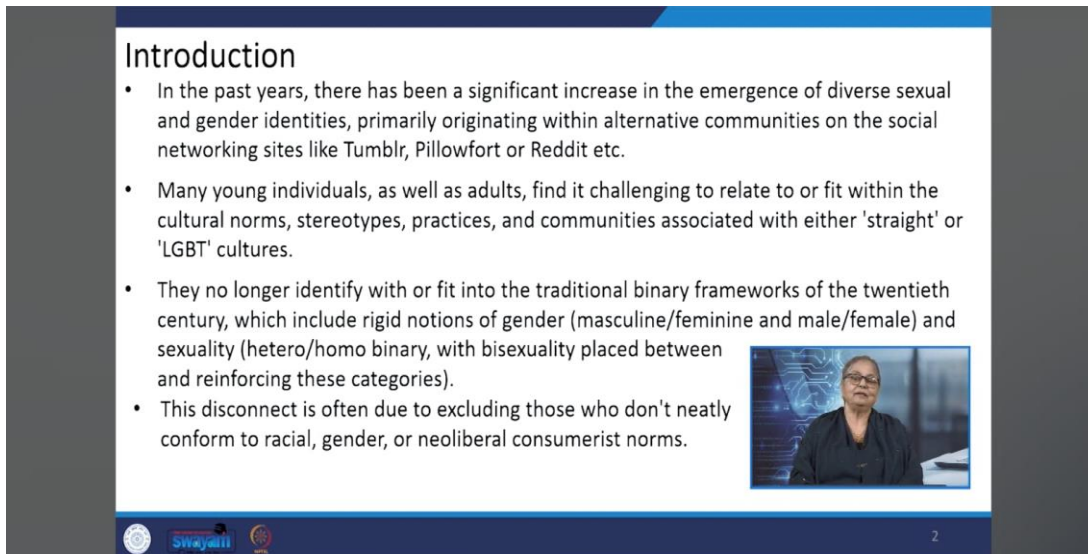



Online Communication in the Digital Age
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Lecture – 51
Gender and Online Communication

Good morning dear friends and welcome to this module. In the previous module, we had looked at aspects of cyberbullying within the paradigms of gender. Within the broader context of digital communication, certain older discourses have taken newer forms of complexities and dimensions. Today, we shall look into the contemporary digital aspects of discourses surrounding sexuality, gender identity, and the emergence of a new taxonomy of labels. It shall enable us to explore the dynamics between the dominant culture paradigms and the emergent narratives of choice, agency, and authenticity in the realm of identity formation through digital means.



Introduction

- In the past years, there has been a significant increase in the emergence of diverse sexual and gender identities, primarily originating within alternative communities on the social networking sites like Tumblr, Pillowfort or Reddit etc.
- Many young individuals, as well as adults, find it challenging to relate to or fit within the cultural norms, stereotypes, practices, and communities associated with either 'straight' or 'LGBT' cultures.
- They no longer identify with or fit into the traditional binary frameworks of the twentieth century, which include rigid notions of gender (masculine/feminine and male/female) and sexuality (hetero/homo binary, with bisexuality placed between and reinforcing these categories).
- This disconnect is often due to excluding those who don't neatly conform to racial, gender, or neoliberal consumerist norms.



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There has been a significant increase over the past few years in the emergence of diverse sexual and gender identities, primarily originating within alternative communities on the social networking sites like Tumblr, Pillow Fort, or Reddit, etc.

Many young individuals, as well as adults, sometimes find it challenging to relate to or fit within the cultural norms, stereotypes, practices, and communities associated with either straight or LGBT culture. They no longer fit into the conventional binary framework of the 28th century, including the rigid notions of gender in terms of

masculine and feminine, as well as sexuality, which includes the hetero and homo binary, whereas bisexuality is placed between and reinforcing these categories in turn. This disconnect is often due to excluding those who don't really conform to racial, gender, or neoliberal consumerist norms. Older taxonomies and classification systems have shaped how we have discussed topics related to sexuality, sexual behavior, sexual morals, gender identities, and relations over the centuries.

These classifications have transformed over time, particularly in the online manifestation of gender and sexuality. The evolving identities and online communities respond to the need of more accurate, inclusive, and encompassing representations of diverse sexual and gender selves. In the context of gender and sexuality, a dominant framework of liberal humanist tolerance exists, albeit with some residual homophobia and heterosexism. The emergent framework does not necessarily oppose the dominant one entirely, but draws from it to create new configurations, meanings, values, and practices. The new perspective encourages discussions about gender and sexual choice, challenging the assumption that all sexualities and genders are innate.

Emergent Taxonomy on Gender

- In the context of gender and sexuality, a dominant framework of liberal-humanist tolerance exists, albeit with some residual homophobia and heterosexism.
 - The 'emergent' framework doesn't oppose the dominant one entirely, but draws from it to create new configurations, meanings, values, and practices.
- This new perspective encourages discussions about gender and sexual choice, challenging the assumption that all sexualities and genders are innate.
- It represents a significant cultural shift in how we think about, enact, represent, and practice gender and sexuality. Digital communication practices and how we perceive these issues through them, play a significant role, as suggested by Rob Cover, an Australian Professor of Digital Communication.

Rob Cover

Emergent Identities

IDENTITY AND DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

Source: www.alumni.uwa.edu.au
www.amazon.in

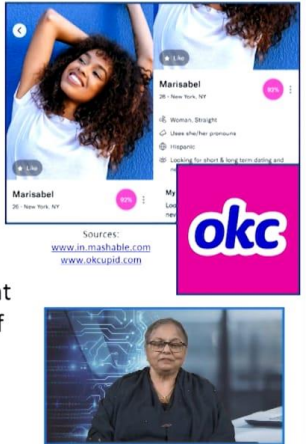
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It represents a significant cultural shift in how we think about how do we enact, represent, and practice gender as well as sexuality. Digital communication practices and how we perceive these issues through them play a significant role as suggested by Rob Cover, an Australian professor of digital communication. The emerging framework seems to be more about proliferating identity labels and practices that accommodate complexity, intersectionality, and fluidity within the existing liberal humanist understanding of identity. We can define liberal humanism as a philosophical and literary movement in which man and his capabilities are the central concern. It can also be defined as a system of historically changing views that recognize the value of the human being as an individual and has a right to liberty and happiness.

However, liberal humanists attempt to understand the individual identity by excluding

environmental circumstances. Advances in social networking, the development of deep fake videos, intimacies of everyday communication through digital means, the emergence of cultures based on algorithms as we have been discussing in the previous modules, as well as the authenticity of TikTok and online communication setting as a site for hostility and hate speech are areas of concern when we talk about sexuality, gender, and identity in the digital world. Rob Cover in his research has discussed how the formation and curation of self-identity is increasingly performed and engaged through digital cultural practices affirming that these practices must be understood if we are to make sense of identity in the 2020s and beyond.

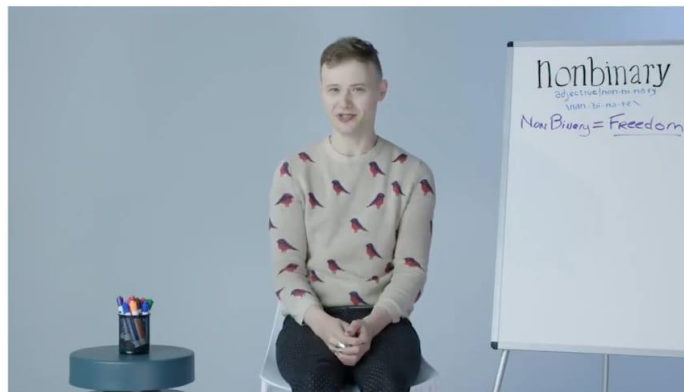
- The emergence of new taxonomies of gender and sexuality in the past half-decade reflects a cultural need for more descriptive and inclusive language to capture the complexities of human behavior, particularly concerning gender, sexuality, attraction, relationships, and self-identity.
- This diversification primarily occurred within online spaces, such as Tumblr, social justice communities, and dating sites like OkCupid, where interactive engagement and dialogue significantly developed a broader range of labels for sexuality and gender.
 - Academically, these labels offer new ways to interpret texts and data but also pose difficulties in communication.



The image shows a screenshot of an OkCupid profile for a user named 'Marisabel'. The profile includes a photo of a woman with curly hair, a bio, and several tags such as 'Womxn, Straight', 'Uses she/her pronouns', and 'Looking for short & long term dating and friends'. Below the profile, there are source links: 'www.in.mashable.com' and 'www.okcupid.com'. To the right of the text is a video thumbnail featuring Rob Cover, a man with glasses, in a dark setting with blue light effects.

The emergence therefore of new taxonomies of gender and sexuality in the past half decade reflects a cultural need for more descriptive and inclusive language to capture the complexities of human behavior, particularly concerning gender, sexuality, attraction, relationships, and self-identity. This diversification has particularly occurred within online spaces such as Tumblr, social justice communities, and dating sites like OkCupid, where interactive engagement and dialogue significantly developed a broader range of labels for sexuality and gender.

Academically, these labels offer new ways to interpret text and data, but also pose difficulties in communication. Health practitioners and researchers often struggle to understand these new terms, leading to challenges in appropriate caregiving and education. While there are challenges, the emergence of new gender and sexuality representations are generally viewed as a positive development. To better understand this phenomenon, examining how these new terms are arising and their implications for challenging dominant identity crisis is crucial. In the following video, we shall look at an advertisement from Tinder, a popular dating app on the concept of non-binary.



Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVe8wpmH_IU

There's a whole variety of experiences that people have that cause them to question like, hey, maybe I don't actually fit into the definition of, you know, man or woman and that there's something else. Hi, I'm Danny and I identify as non-binary. I'm Lindsay and I identify as non-binary. My name is Feng. I identify as a non-gendered person.

I'm Francois. I identify as genderqueer. My name is James and I identify as non-binary. Non-binary is someone whose gender doesn't fall within the context of the binary that we set up in society. I am not male.

I'm not female. I'm somewhere floating around in there. Non-binary means acknowledging a wider range of experience. For me, it means that I'm not identified with any specific gender like male, female or other things. It's part of a larger kind of goal of questioning these assumptions about gender and questioning why there only need to be two.

It gives me the freedom to express myself. If I wake up one day and I want to spike my hair and do punk rock makeup, I can do it. Every couple of decades, some designer decides that men's shorts are suddenly five inches shorter or five inches longer. In the 70s, if you look at what men were wearing, they were like Rockettes, like shorts were up to here and now it's like, get it down to the knee. Non-binary is freedom from that whole game.

It's like I don't care what the men's department at Marshall's suddenly has decided that like men need to wear. I'm gonna go for what makes me feel more authentic. I tend to say gender is dependent on context and point of view. To me, it just makes me comfortable that I can just be this body that I have. I identified as a cis gay male.

Cis gender is when your gender identity aligns with the gender that you were assigned at birth based on your anatomy. I saw myself as a cis man and just thought, well, I paint my nails and I wear lipstick, but I'm a cis man and I knew what genderqueer was and non-binary. I knew of them and I was like, I support it, I love it, but it's over there. It's not, that's not me. I identified as male before.

I didn't really ever feel comfortable fitting into the masculine or male environments or just seeing myself as a man. I have always had questions as a child. I always like would put on my mother's makeup and her lipstick. I identified quite a while before I came out to people. I started identifying as non-binary when I was 17.

I just knew that calling myself a woman and calling myself a girl did not feel accurate and did not feel good and did not feel like a home to me at that time in my life anymore. Most people are still very confused about trans identity, non-binary, gender fluid. Even though it's 2019, it's not something that everybody runs and be like, oh, you're genderqueer. Yay, hugs and kisses.

We love you still. The hardest thing about coming out at 17 is no one believes you. Everyone is like, wow, that's a really cute phase you're having. Even when I'm saying what I identify with, people still have a specific imagination of what that means. Most people are going to assume that you're one of two genders, a man or a woman. And so every single day you have to be correcting them and you have to be declaring that you're non-binary to pretty much every new person that you meet.

People often misgender me. Like the second I leave New York, I get called man, like to my face. A lot of times people get pronouns right twice. And then I find it's often the third time that people start slipping. A lot of people think that we're transitioning for some reason.

Some people say, oh, so are you going through transition right now? And some people ask me, so do you still have a vagina? The simplest way to ask about gender if you don't know someone is, hey friend, what are your pronouns? That's it. A lot of us are very different. Some people are like, don't misgender me. And it's a big thing.

And I understand that. Really I do. Personally, I'm always very open and happy to talk to people about it. I remember a few times I went on job interviews and I dressed like how I am. And I did very, very well in the first interview and they're like, oh, you did so well. Just when you come next time, can you dress like a boy? It's especially challenging in dating.


No one really knows how to deal with you and whether they're allowed to be attracted to you really. Some people, they just say they want to date men. The worst is whenever someone's like, well, yeah, but you have a penis, right? People will be very fixated with anatomical gender. You can't be seen as heterosexual.

You can't be seen as homosexual. And so when you try to date a girl, it's like, you're too feminine. You're not masculine enough. And you try to date a guy who's gay and he's like, you're not masculine enough or you're too feminine or something. It's always something. What is your knowledge of gender identity? I think people's knowledge of this is definitely getting a lot better with time.


We're becoming more relatable. People are seeing us for who we are. And so I think that that brings about this general air of acceptance. I think the future of gender identity, hopefully, is one where we don't force the binary on everybody. I think the future of gender identity is so much more like colorful and wide and different and like varied as we think it even can be. I hope that the future will move towards more of individual expression rather than this mob mentality to follow the crowd, to be like everybody else.

I definitely wish that we can all just pass through this phase of trying to categorize it, categorize people, and just take them as what they are. Being able to reclaim our narratives, I think that's the next step is that trans voices are the ones speaking for trans people and non-binary voices become the ones speaking for non-binary people. Online platforms like the Urban Dictionary have become valuable resources for understanding and defining new and emerging terms related to sexual and gender identity. These platforms serve as indicators of concepts transitioning from the margins of society to the mainstream language.

- The emergence of a new lexicon, especially in digital communication, is exemplified by terms like "non-binary" and "sapiosexual," which challenge traditional binary concepts of gender and sexuality.
 - "Non-binary" refers to individuals who do not identify as exclusively male or female.
 - "Sapiosexual" emphasizes intellectual attraction rather than gender or sexual orientation.
- Rather than gender being the lowest common denominator of sexual attraction, these terms open up the possibility of sexuality that is not defined by the genders of the subject or the object of interest.
 - They rather provide a categorization based principally on the intelligence or intellectual attributes of subjects.



Source: www.rainbow-project.org



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The emergence of this new lexicon, especially in digital communication, is exemplified

by terms like non-binary and sapiosexual, which challenge traditional binary concepts of gender and sexuality.

Non-binary refers to individuals who do not identify exclusively as males or females, whereas sapiosexual emphasizes intellectual attraction rather than gender or sexual orientation. Rather than gender being the lowest common denominator of sexual attraction, these terms open up the possibility of sexuality that is not defined by the genders of the subject or the object of interest. They in fact provide a categorization based principally on the intelligence or intellectual attributes of subjects. This categorization may be possibly regardless of gender at all. This means that sapiosexual people can also be queer, gay or pansexual, etc. and they might also identify as non-binary. Sapiosexual is a valuable term when considering a new taxonomy of sexual attraction as it acknowledges that many people prioritize qualities of the mind in their real-world experiences of attraction. While physical aspects play a role in flirting and attraction, verbal communication expressing intellectual and taste-related interests also intersects with discussions of sex and allows various attributes to influence one's attractiveness. What sets sapiosexual apart is its departure from gender-centric identities, making it unique by divorcing gender from sexual identity categorization and self-description. Sapiosexual's emphasis on the mind over the body reveals a limitation in the new language of sexual identity categorization.

☰ Lecture 51: Gender and Online Communication

- Sapiosexual's emphasis on the 'mind' over the 'body' reveals a limitation in the new language of sexual identity categorization.
- This focus on mind/body dualism contradicts the aims of critical perspectives like queer theory, posthumanism, and poststructuralism, which seek to challenge such dualistic thinking.
- While sapiosexual challenges the link between gender and sexuality, it does not challenge the fundamental idea of subjectivity rooted in René Descartes' seventeenth-century dualism, which separates the mind and body.
 - Cartesian mind/body dualism has traditionally provided the human subject with unquestioned certainty, truth, and presence, a concept critiqued in more contemporary critical theories and philosophy.

SAPIOSEXUAL
(n.) one who is attracted to or aroused by intelligence in others

Source: www.quora.com

17:37 / 45:12 Scroll for details

This focus on mind and body dualism contradicts the aims of critical perspectives like queer theory, post-humanism and post-structuralism which seek to challenge such dualistic thinking. While sapiosexual challenges the link between gender and sexuality, it does not challenge the fundamental idea of subjectivity rooted in Descartes' 17th century dualism which separates the mind and the body. Cartesian dualism has traditionally


provided the human subject with unquestioned certainty, truth and presence, a concept which is being critiqued in more contemporary critical theories and philosophical approaches. There is an active engagement by the public in online platforms in classifying and defining these new gender and sexuality terminologies. This process resembles the scientific taxonomy of the 19th century but primarily centres on classification.

Unlike other theoretical perspectives that embrace fluidity, the new taxonomy seeks clarity and organization despite the complexity of dealing with numerous new labels for gender and sexuality. It definitely marks a shift from declassification and presents a critique of existing systems.


- The emergence of non-binary and unconventional gender and sexual identities is not simply a matter of individualism or absurdity but reflects a deeply felt and reflective constitution of identity. These identities are relational and defined in contrast to the dominant binary models.
- These gender and sexual categorizations are experienced as sensations that translate into emotions, attractions, and desires, rather than mere theatrics of taste.
 - They are not superficial overlays on existing categories but represent a genuine depth of feeling.

What Does It Mean to Be Sapiosexual?

For someone who is sapiosexual, a person's intellect stimulates sexual arousal or attraction, and any gender or age can identify as sapiosexual. For instance, a person may be gay and sapiosexual, female and sapiosexual, or trans and sapiosexual.



Source: www.choosingtherapy.com



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They are not superficial overlays on existing categories but rather represent a genuine depth of feeling. During discussions, dialogues, debates and personal accounts on platforms like Tumblr and YouTube, the depth of feeling regarding unconventional gender and sexual identities becomes evident. This is exemplified by a range of identities such as aceflux, that means fluctuating between a sexual and hypersexual

attraction or aromantic, suggesting little or no romantic attraction or maxigender, which suggests experiencing many or all available genders or neutrois, a gender neutral or genderless identity or skoliosexual, which suggests attraction to non-binary individuals as well as several others. Some LGBTIQ youth-oriented groups require participants to define their genders and sexualities from comprehensive lists and some members assess these definitions by reviewing their prior Facebook posts. This practice, although seen as intrusive and boundary policing, reflects evolving ethical norms in online youth communication.

It highlights creating and maintaining an extensive identity taxonomy that expects labels to align with specific behavioural evidence. It challenges traditional gender and sexuality frameworks while perpetuating some normative practices like stereotyping and associating labels with anticipated behaviours. In this context, these new gender and sexual identity categories result from a cultural phenomenon known as generationalism. Generationalism relies on arbitrary age and birth date distinctions as discussed by Davis in 1997 and result in a disruption of the consensus regarding sexual knowledge between adult and youth as noted by Hebdige research in 1979. References about these studies are cited in the reference section.

It is at this point important to note that generational distinctions are essentially artificial. Nevertheless, they serve as a means to interpret shifts in cultural practices. At this stage, I would refer to the 2013 article by Lenore Bell. The title of this article is *Trigger Warnings, Sex, Lies and Social Justice Utopia on Tumblr*, which has raised concerns about the burgeoning landscape of sexuality and gender identity labels.

- Lenore Bell (2013) questions the authenticity of the claims of intricate sexual subjectivities found in queer social justice circles on Tumblr.
- She critiques what she perceives as an overly individualistic trend that projects a new form of authenticity, contrasting it with the established gender and sexual terminology.



Bell's suspicion centers on whether these identity labels within the new taxonomy genuinely reflect deeply held attachments!

Or, whether in some cases, they may involve a certain degree of pretentious theatrics among young individuals expressing their uniqueness in online contexts.

Source:
<https://youtu.be/lllxTwtLWNH0?si=ygBN3Q2TGFv9MdMw>



Lenore Bell has questioned the authenticity of the claims of intricate sexual subjectivities found in queer social justice circles on Tumblr.

She critiques what she perceives as an overly individualistic trend that projects a new form of authenticity, contrasting it with established gender and sexual terminology. Bell's suspicion centres on whether these identity labels within the new taxonomy genuinely reflect deeply held attachments or not, or whether in some cases they may involve a certain degree of pretentious theatrics, particularly among young individuals expressing their uniqueness in online contexts. Bell's criticism of the new taxonomy is problematic as it hinges on the idea of a real set of oppressive categories, for example, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and altogether dismisses micro minority identities as selfish and lacking self-awareness. She also distinguishes between real life and online identity performances, asserting that online spaces like Tumblr allow for expressions not openly shown in the physical world. However, this perspective overlooks the obsolescence of the real virtual binary in the era of Web 2.0 where individuals authentically express their identities on various online settings as well as in offline situations.

- Asexuality, often referred to as 'ace,' is a significant identity label within the new taxonomy of sexual and gender identities.
 - Traditionally, asexuality was associated with clinical terms like 'frigidity' or pathological aversion to sexuality.
 - However, similar to the reclamation of 'queer' from negative connotations, the term 'asexuality' has been repurposed to represent a specific sexual identity that coexists with traditional labels like lesbian, gay, and bisexual.
- What sets asexuality apart is that it defines a subjectivity not based on sexual attraction but on the absence or minimal presence of sexual attraction or desire toward others.
- While it was once viewed as a psychological or pathological condition, it is now increasingly embraced as an identity label characterized by pride.



Source: www.thetrevorproject.org



Another significant identity label which we come across in the new taxonomy of sexual and gender identities is asexuality. It is also often referred to simply as ace. Traditionally, asexuality was associated with clinical terms like frigidity or pathological aversion to sexuality. However, similar to the reclamation of queer from negative connotations, the term asexuality has also been repurposed to represent a specific sexual identity that co-exists with traditional labels like lesbian, gay, or bisexual, etc. What sets asexuality apart is that it defines the subjectivity not based on sexual attraction but on the absence or minimal presence of sexual attraction or desire toward others.

While it was once viewed as a psychological or pathological condition, it is now being increasingly embraced as an identity label recognized by several pride movements. In the 1940s, Alfred Kinsey and his team had introduced an X category for individuals, people who lacked sexual feeling or desire. Asexuality as an identity challenges traditional notions of sexual interest by recognizing its variability. Society often denies the complexity of sexuality and has shamed those whose desire for sex differs from hyper masculine stereotypes. Michael Warner in 1999 had astutely noted that people possess a nuanced understanding of sexuality often concealed publicly due to the societal norms and moral judgments.

Relative anonymity and the reach of the digital communication tools has made such expressions relatively stress-free.

- Reclaiming asexuality as an identity has enabled people to counter shaming practices and openly express their asexuality with pride.
- It operates on a spectrum, allowing for the recognition of the variability in sexual experience.
 - It is portrayed as both a categorical label and a part of a continuum, which contributes to the ethical acknowledgement of diverse sexual experiences.
 - Asexuality is an orientation, signifying a shift in how we perceive sexuality and desire as processes.
 - Asexuality is viewed as a *protest identity*, particularly in response to a perceived hypersexual society.
 - It questions the separation between the sexual and romantic aspects of relationships, highlighting how contemporary gender and sexuality language challenges traditional categorizations.



Sources: en.wikipedia.org , www.ippf.org



Reclaiming asexuality as an identity has enabled people to counter shaming practices and openly express their asexuality with pride. It operates on a spectrum allowing for the recognition of the variability in sexual experience. It is portrayed as both a categorical label and a part of a continuum which contributes to the ethical acknowledgement of diverse sexual experiences. Asexuality is viewed as a protest identity, particularly in response to a perceived hyper sexual society.

It questions the separation between the sexual and romantic aspects of relationships, highlighting how contemporary gender and sexuality language is capable to challenge the traditional and conventional categorizations. Alongside other gender and sexuality labels, asexuality contributes to a more inclusive and accepting understanding of sexual identities free from judgment and hierarchy.

- This new taxonomy, while offering a vast array of identity possibilities, doesn't necessarily challenge the cultural demand for identity itself.
- Eve Sedgwick's work in 1990 focused on examining how cultural, discursive, and linguistic representations of genders and sexualities operated, particularly within the hetero/homo binary framework.
 - She used poststructuralist critique, influenced by Michel Foucault, to delve into this analysis.
 - Her aim was to better understand the contingency and fragility of the conventional wisdom surrounding these binary categories.
 - She highlighted the influential role of discourse in shaping our perceptions of sexuality, gender, and relationships, often portraying them as natural and timeless.



Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick
Source: www.chronicle.com



This new taxonomy, while offering a vast array of identity possibilities, does not necessarily challenge the cultural demand for identity itself. Eve Sedgwick's work in 1990s had focused on examining how cultural discursive and linguistic representations of genders and sexualities operated, particularly within the hetero homo binary framework. She had used poststructuralist critique influenced by Michel Foucault to go deeper into this analysis and had highlighted the role of discourse in shaping our perceptions of gender and sexualities, etc.

The combined insights of Sedgwick's critique of discourse and Judith Butler's examination of how discourse shapes what it represents create a robust framework for understanding gender and sexual subjectivity. This framework is not limited to critiquing the dominant categories they initially addressed, but extends to interpreting the dynamics of emerging identity and subjectivity representations in digital communication and social media platforms today.

- Sedgwick's primary goal was to critique and destabilize the binary identity framework, shedding light on its limitations and complexities.
- Identity operates "in accord" with available discourses and languages, ultimately producing and circulating norms.
- Individuals tend to retroactively understand themselves as having always possessed their chosen identity, even though it was recently encountered.
- While the new taxonomy offers a broader range of possibilities, it remains a regimented framework for identity, much like previous classifications.
- The emergence of the new taxonomy doesn't necessarily open up new possibilities for gender and sexual identity, but can be just as regimented as prior frameworks.



Source: www.amazon.in



swayam



Sedgwick had primarily aimed at critiquing and destabilizing the binary identity framework, illustrating its limitations as well as complexities. Identity operates in accord with available discourses and languages, ultimately producing and circulating and strengthening norms. Individuals tend to retroactively understand themselves as having always possessed their chosen identity, even though it was recently encountered.

While the New Taxonomy offers a broader range of possibilities, it remains a regimented framework for identity much like previous classifications. The emergence of the New Taxonomy does not necessarily open up new possibilities for gender and sexual identity, but can be just as regimented as previous frameworks. Identity is always constructed within the available cultural and linguistic frameworks. Individuals may disavow aspects of themselves to conform to societal norms. The cultural demand for coherent intelligible and recognizable identities often may result in the suppression of alternatives.

- Additionally, the new taxonomy, like older identity frameworks, tends to be regulatory, defining expected behaviors and norms that people must adhere to maintain stable and coherent identities.
 - These ideals exploit the cultural demand for "continuity, visibility, and place" in a subject's existence.
 - The emergence of this new framework prompts questions about why society continues to subject and subordinate individuals to identity regimes.
- This phenomenon is described as a "double promise" in which categorization produces subordination and ensures the continuation of existence as subjects.
 - Complex interplay between the desire for categorization and the need for social belonging enforces these identity regimes.



Additionally, the New Taxonomy, like older identity frameworks, tends to be rather regulatory, defining expected behaviors and norms that people must adhere to maintain stable and coherent identities. These ideas exploit the cultural demand for continuity, visibility and place in a subject's existence. The emergence of this new framework prompts questions about why society continues to subject and subordinate individuals to identity regimes. This phenomenon is described as a double promise in which categorization produces subordination and ensures the continuation of existence as subjects. A complex interplay between the desire for categorization and the need for social belonging enforces these identity regimes.

Choosing or changing one's identity or orientation online in mediums of digital communication has become more conspicuous in everyday language alongside the emergence of New Taxonomies of gender and sexuality.

- “In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity.”-Erik Erikson*
- People share all aspects of their lives on social media. Digital spaces are as important as any physical space.
 - While it’s recognized that being transgender is not a choice, individuals often make choices related to transitioning, such as timing, arrangements, and surgical interventions, and share them on social media platforms in the hope that they will be able to find understanding communities.
- This space is important for alternate sexual choices, as the societies often retain patriarchal and discriminatory norms.
- Along with online discriminations of gender gap and impact of gig technologies on women, this liberating aspect is also significant.



Sources: www.bbc.com,
<https://practicapedia.com/erik-erikson/>



* <https://www.123helpme.com/essay/Analysis-Of-Eriksons-Stages-Of-Psychosocial-Development-512664#:~:text=Erik%20Erikson%20once%20said%2C%20%E2%80%9CIn,is%20what%20living%20is%20about>



I would repeat a quote from the famous psychologist Erik Erikson and he had said that in the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity. And nowadays we find that this identity is being created through digital means of communication. People share all aspects of their lives on social media and digital spaces have become as important as any other physical space. While it is recognized that being a transgender is not a choice, individuals often make choices related to transitioning such as timing arrangements and surgical interventions etc.

and share them on social media platforms in the hope that they will be able to find some communities which would understand them. This space is important therefore for alternate sexual choices as the societies in general remain patriarchal and possess discriminatory norms. Along with online discriminations of gender gap and impact of gig technologies on women, this liberating aspect of social media is also significant. In digital communication there are opportunities for enacting traditional sex role stereotypes as well as opportunities to enact equality and thus disseminating calls for liberation and increased equality between the sexes in all aspects of social life. Despite some negative experiences, online spaces still play an important role in affirming gender and sexual identities and in providing a sense of community and friendship.

At this point of our discussion, I would refer to an article by Rachela Colosi, Nick Cowen and Megan Todt. This article was published in the January 2023 issue of Sociology Compass. The title of this interesting and argumentative article is sexual and gender identity work on social media.

- Digital platforms offer opportunities to subvert heteronormativity.
- Bates et al. (2020) explored digital platforms in the ‘narrative identity development’ of young sexual and gender minorities.
- Their findings indicate that online spaces ‘have become a transformative tool’ which can be used to ‘perform differing identity work’.
- Moreover, in facilitating different expressions of identity, the multifaceted nature of digital media is highlighted, whereby multiple platforms are used simultaneously to help sexual and gender minorities manage the presentation of self .*



Source: <https://inc42.com/resources/the-gendered-digital-space-gender-representation-online/>

*“Sexual and gender identity work on social media” Rachela Colosi, Nick Cowen and Megan Todd, Sociology Compass, January 2023

Source: <https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/soc4.13073#:~:text=The%20findings%20indicate%20digital%20platforms,providing%20a%20sense%20of%20community>



This suggests that digital platforms offer opportunities to subvert heteronormativity. Bates et al cited by Colosi explore digital platforms in the narrative identity development of young sexual and gender minorities.

Their findings indicate that online spaces have become a transformative tool which can be used to perform differing identity work. Moreover, in facilitating different expressions of identity, the multifaceted nature of digital media is highlighted whereby multiple platforms are used simultaneously to help sexual and gender minorities in managing the representation of the self. Digital platforms play an important role in our personal and also in our intimate lives. Gender and sexual minorities use online spaces for positive personal development and exploration to inform friendships, sexual culture and also as a source of information and support. Despite the positive role of digital platforms, sexual and gender minorities face challenges online also in navigating their way around these spaces and countering sometimes online injuries.

The discrimination experienced offline is sometimes reproduced in the online spaces also. It reflects the social stigma associated with non-normative gender and sexual identities.

- Colosi et al refer to a research by Das and Farber(2020) to support their idea that “the Internet can function as a place of transcendence and freedom”.
- Signpost YouTube and personal vlogs can be understood as examples of digital spaces in which sexual and gender minorities are able to ‘redefine dominant conceptions of identity’.
- Sexual and gender minorities seek identity affirmation through digital forms of communication as part of a process of self-exploration.
- However, individuals may also engage with multiple performances simultaneously across digital platforms to showcase different versions of themselves, making it difficult to manage how they are seen by others.



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Source <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rachela-Colosi>



swayam



Colosi and others referred to a research by Das and Farber conducted in 2020 to support their idea that the internet can function as a place of transcendence and freedom. Signposts, YouTube and personal blogs can also be understood as examples of digital spaces in which sexual and gender minorities are able to redefine dominant conceptions of identity. They seek identity affirmation through digital forms of communication as part of a process of self-exploration.

However, individuals may also engage with multiple performances simultaneously across different digital platforms to showcase different versions of themselves making it difficult to manage how they are seen by others. Mainline platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as well as alternate platforms like FetLife, Reddit, Snapchat, Tumblr, Whiplr, WhatsApp, etc. are important for the minority gender choices. People use them as a source of support and to connect with trans users. It is a key benefit of digital platforms as they facilitate a sense of community amongst both sexual and gender minorities.

Such creation of safe spaces helps the gender minorities in the construction and management of their digital gender identity.

Stereotypes, Prejudice & Discrimination

- Digital platforms offer opportunities to subvert heteronormativity.
- Despite the benefits of online spaces for sexual and gender minorities, and as a space created to facilitate self-presentation digital platforms do not always provide sanctuary for these communities, with online hostility identified as a significant challenge.
- There is evidence that sexual and gender identities considered to be non-normative, experience stigma on mainstream digital platforms.

STEREOTYPE (idea)
"People with pink hair are mean."

PREJUDICE (feeling)
"I don't like people with pink hair."

DISCRIMINATION (action)
"I am not going to let anyone with pink hair sit next to me at lunch."

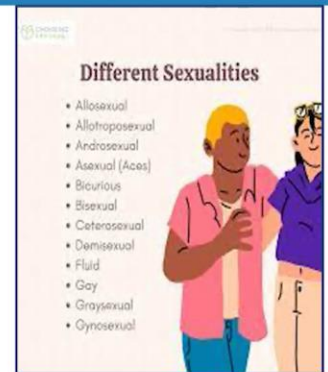
Source:
<https://medium.com/@e.zeed@unfa/stereotypes-and-prejudice-and-discrimination-a-ecf1e1-439306607217>
https://cbekevs.org/product_detail/28489730.html

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However, it is to be noted that these online spaces do not always provide sanctuary for these communities. Online hostility has already been identified as a major challenge. There is evidence that sexual and gender identities which are considered to be non-normative experience stigma on mainstream digital platforms also. The existence of a profound schism and deeply felt attitudes form the framework for discussions regarding gender and sexual choice and change.

This schism relates to debates between the born that way arguments in the perspectives emphasizing changeability. It is also connected to debates within LGBT studies, essentialist versus constructionist views and the nature or nurture debates in popular science, journalism and blogging. These sets of dichotomies actively condition the way virtually every articulation about the authenticity of minority sexualities of transitioning genders is framed.

- Research indicates that gender and sexual minorities are policed on digital platforms via the Terms and Conditions used by online sites to govern user behavior, and via the responses, or anticipated responses of users who may shame, or direct abuse towards those communities.
 - This leads to feelings of exclusion amongst minorities, with implications for their overall sense of wellbeing .
- The stigmatization of non-normative sexuality and gender has further repercussions for *how* gender and sexual minorities manage and present their online identities, with individuals expressing the need to be cautious during online interactions .
- ‘Selfies’ are also identified as an important way of establishing and affirming online gender identity.



Source: www.choosingtherapy.com



Research also indicates that gender and sexual minorities are policed on digital platforms via the terms and conditions used by online sites to govern the user behavior and via the responses or anticipated responses of users who may shame or direct abuse towards these communities.

This leads to a feeling of exclusion amongst the minorities with implications for their overall sense of well-being. The stigmatization of non-normative sexuality and gender has further repercussions for how gender and sexual minorities manage and present their online identities with individuals expressing the need to be cautious during digital interactions. Selfies are also identified as an important way of establishing and affirming online gender identity. The importance of selfies whilst coming out is stressed by the trans people. A trans woman or a trans man may use pictures on their accounts to signal their gender identity.

The significance of visual digital platforms such as Instagram, photo and video blogs provide opportunities to claim a sense of gender identity for the trans individuals. Photographs and video blogs etc. are props but they are important in helping to construct and convey identity to others and to oneself. However mainstream digital platforms are dominated by heteronormative values. Alternative sites such as Fet life and Whiplr are identified as safe online spaces in which the trans people could engage freely with their identity work.

Barriers to identity work

- There are online factors which hinder self-expression.
 - Examples include hostile responses (experienced or anticipated) of users; and bio-descriptor limitations on profile settings, esp. for mainstream platforms such as Facebook.
 - Instances of homophobia and transphobia on mainstream digital platforms, may result into 'trolling' due to the anonymity of online communication.
 - For the trans persons, user hostility is often anticipated in relation to the use of pronouns; which may be interpreted as contentious, leading to inappropriate labelling (misnaming) and online abuse.
 - Significant fear of being shamed and 'othered' because of their gender and/or sexual identities, leading to the creation and use of multiple accounts.
- These barriers/restrictions are experienced differently.



Source: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/csw61/remove-the-barriers>



Let us also look at certain barriers to identity work which are felt by the sexual and gender minorities. So, there are online factors which hinder self-expression. Examples include hostile responses especially on mainstream platforms such as Facebook. Instances of homophobia and transphobia on mainstream digital platforms which may also result into trolling due to the anonymity of online communication. For the trans persons, user hostility is often anticipated in relation to the use of pronouns which may be interpreted sometimes as contentious leading to inappropriate labeling or misnaming as well as online abuse.

Significant fear of being shaped and othered because of their gender or sexual identities also leads to the creation and use of multiple accounts by such people. However these barriers or restrictions are experienced differently by different people owing to several differences. On platforms where bio descriptions provide space to include pronouns, there is little evidence that users are including them outside of gender and sexual minority groups. The importance of including a pronoun is emphasized by charities and support networks representing sexual and gender minorities who encourage people across different communities to use them on digital platforms as well as a part of their email signatures.

Conclusion

- Digital platforms facilitate identity work. Online spaces are increasingly significant in shaping how we present ourselves to others, and also provide an important space to help navigate identity and cultivate a sense of self-awareness.
- However, barriers which impinge on the identity work of sexual and gender minorities are also evident.
- Conflicting sets of feeling, cultural contexts and online framing rules/expectations of different online forums, cause individuals to divide up their online social worlds.
 - Some individuals may prefer to remain "unlabeled" because their sexual experiences and desires do not neatly fit conventional/existing identity labels.
 - Some may reject identity labels due to the lack of nuance and the baggage associated with traditional labels, and may prefer multiple identity labels which are more fluid and nuanced.



Digital platforms facilitate the identity work in the context of gender. Online spaces are becoming increasingly significant in shaping how we present ourselves to others and also provide an important space to help navigate identity and cultivate a sense of self-awareness. However, there are barriers which impinge on the identity work of sexual and gender minorities. Conflicting sets of feeling, cultural context and online framing of rules and expectations of different online forums may cause individuals to divide up their online social worlds. Some individuals may prefer to remain unlabelled because their sexual experiences and desires do not neatly fit into conventional or existing identity labels. Some may reject identity labels due to the lack of nuances and also because of the baggage associated with traditional labels and may prefer multiple identity labels which are more fluid and nuanced.

Such individuals may use phrases like labels are for cans or reject pull-down menu identity disclosures in favour of self-articulated description in text boxes. The emergent culture of the new taxonomy competes not only with the dominant frameworks for gender and sexual identity but is also challenged by other emergent ways of articulating subjectivity, identity, categorization, recognition and classification. In the next module, we shall continue with this discussion. Thank you.