

Transgenderism in Cyberspace: Technology Empowering Transgender



Sugyanta Priyadarshini, Deepanjali Mishra, Sukanta Chandra Swain

Abstract: *Technology has irreversibly transformed the society and provided a platform to shape the values believes and culture of masses keeping in mind the elimination of gender disparity. However, the existence of Transgender section has challenged the rigid concept of this binary arrangement of social institution. As biological sex does not coincide with the gender identity, transgenders experience severe violence and harassment and most of them are subjected to housing and employment discrimination. Major technological advances such as cyberspace, internet and mass media have provided enormous opportunities for transgender upliftment. Socializing from private realms to discussing various sensitive and embarrassing issues on social platform, from offering or receiving suitable advice and support regarding coming out to sharing unconventional emotions staying at the fringes of the society, technology plays a significant role in tackling gender inequality and empowering transgender. This paper, therefore examines how cyberspace and mass media empowers transgenders by overcoming offline impediments related to their gender and awaking common masses vis-à-vis the issues transgender face due to their gender identity.*

Keywords: *Transgender, cisgender, cyberspace, internet, mass media, technology.*

I. INTRODUCTION

A transgender woman who reveals her identity in the online world- an identity which she cannot reveal in the offline world; a reporter in a reputed newspaper who secretly wears his mother's inner garments for several years and after a decade comes across an article that his shameful act has a name – transvestitism. A transgender teenage boy who discovered friends online has turned to be his offline friends as well, putting an absolute end to his seclusion. A transwoman fantasy of transforming into transsexual converted into reality by coming across YouTube videos related to sex reassignment surgery. These stories the researcher has come across while conducting a line of investigation work, epitomize how transgender use cyberspace and technology to achieve things, they could not

have accomplished otherwise.

It is universally accepted statement that technology has offered a huge platform for economic, social and political progress of people. Technology has revolutionized the world from an era of oblivion to epoch of enlightenment. In social context, technology has irreversibly transformed the society and provided a podium to shape the values, believes and culture of masses. However, technology has played a pivotal role in eliminating gender disparity. In terms of gender, our modern society is restricted to male/female binary arrangement categorizing individuals as either male or female. However, the existence of Transgender section has challenged the rigid concept of this binary arrangement of social institution. Transgender are the individuals whose sexual anatomy doesn't match with their corresponding gender identity. The life of Transgender is a tussle for acceptance. The existence of Trans section of the society has remained unaccepted till date. Contemporary Indian society's attitude towards transgender is deceitful. From getting bullied at school and colleges to being homeless and living in acute poverty, from being fired or denied for a job to refusal from accessing a shelter, from facing abuse or violence to denial of health treatment, transgender has to face it all alone. Nevertheless, transgenders are crucial part of Indian economy and play a significant role in social, economic and political sectors. But with the passage of time, technology is immensely contributing towards Transgenders empowerment. Major technological advances such as Internet and mass media has provided enormous opportunities for transgender upliftment. Despite an increase in awareness about issues affecting transgender, progress on this front continues to stall. Technology is providing us with tools to tackle gender inequality and empower transgender. This paper, therefore examines how cyberspace and mass media empowers transgenders by overcoming offline impediments related to their gender.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Technology has led a firm foundation for socializing with peers via internet. Online communication has transformed face to face interaction to socialize from private realms irrespective of traditional boundaries of time and space. Prominently it is not limited to any specific geographical location and is free from time constraints (available for 24 hours) (White & Dorman, 2001). Even if cyberspace is mostly discussed in terms of networked individualism (Castells, 2001) and personalized networking (Wellman, 2001), but is currently considered as 'being online is fully social.' (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 168).

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Bakardjieva termed (2003) immobile socialization which is a cultural trend where individuals communicating online often get indulged into intensive social interaction. These unique social settings make cyberspace a complete social sphere which attracts the socially marginalized users to socialize with others from their private realms.

Internet has empowered many socially marginalized users by providing a sense of belongingness and social support which they develop via interacting with fellow users (Finn, 1996; Finn, 1999; Shaw & Gant, 2002; Wellman, 2001). They frame a networked discussion group which comprises of multi participants focusing on the specific topic of interest (Marciano, 2011). These participants share social ties to establish and maintain an emotional relationship.(Boase, Horrigan, Wellman & Rainie, 2006). Cyberspace provides stigmatized participants with a welcoming venue where they discuss various sensitive and embarrassing issues (Idriss, Kvedar, & Waston, 2009; White & Dorman, 2001), express their unconventional behavior, offer or receive suitable advice and support, meet other folks staying at the fringes of the society (Hegland & Nelson, 2002, p. 141).Diverse study has been carried out by many prominent researchers have demonstrated the positive influence of the Internet on different minority groups, such as low-income families (Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop, 2004), cancer patients (Radin, 2006), physically handicapped (Bowker & Tuffin, 2007), sexual minorities (Marciano, 2011; Mehra et al., 2004), hearing-impaired people (Barak & Sadovsky, 2008), and so on.Idriss and her colleagues (2009) found thatmost of sexual minorities used internet as it was associated with provision of resources (95.3%), expediency (94.0%), access to good advice (91.0%), and lack of discomfiture when dealing with personal issues (90.8%).Internet has brought revolution in the life of sexual minorities by empowering transgenders from rehearsing in virtual world before real show of coming out to expressing their different selves and seeking emotional support, internet has always remained an ideal medium for transgenders to share, care and dare to face every challenge coming their way.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study is based on judgmental qualitative analysis where in depth interview of 7 transgenders and 7 cisgenders from Bhubaneswar of age group 18-65 years were considered who were highly benefitted from internet. Data was collected keeping in mind no constraint on age such that diverse data can be collected from participants of different age group. The perceptions and opinions of both cisgender and transgender were collected regarding the use of internet in enlightening their viewpoint on sexual minorities and concerning the role of internet in socio-economic transformation of transgenders respectively.

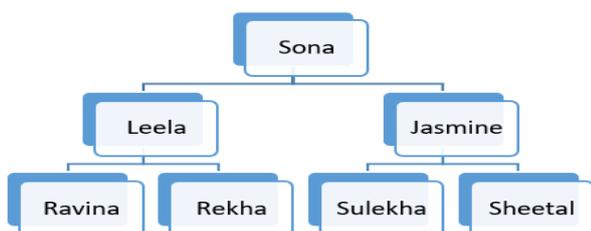


Figure 1: Snowball Sampling used for collecting data from Transgender

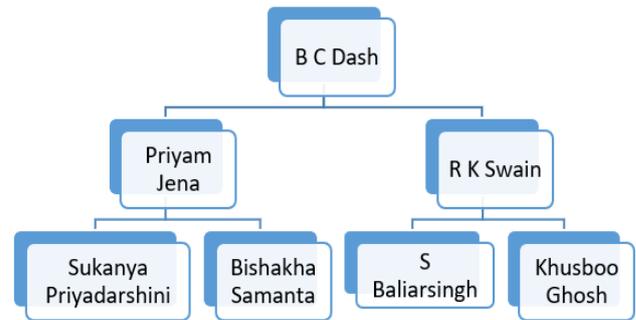


Figure 2: Snowball Sampling used for collecting data from Cisgender

IV. IMPROVING LIVES OF TRANSGENDER THROUGH INTERNET, MASS MEDIA AND CYBERSPACE

Prior to elaborating some of the potential contribution of cyberspace in life of transgender individuals, some of the complex situations and obstructions that the transgenders have to face on a daily basis are reviewed. These reviews not just signify wretched life experiences of transgenders but also puts light on some aspects of discrimination and marginalization faced by them. These troubles shown below are the primary feature that attracts transgenders towards cyberspace.

In most of the societies, gender dichotomy (male or female) is considered as an elementary system by which individuals define their gender.(Hubbard, 1998). Consequently, the resemblance of gender identity and sexuality goes hand in hand. (Butler, 1990). According to the societal structure and considering gender as a social element, every individual is expected to enact according to their gender role at par to their sexuality. (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). But unfortunately, transgenders violate this expectation and this turns out to be the basic reason behind their difficulties and obstacles.

Unappealing gender appearance, challenging binary system of the gender biased society, brings isolation, abandonment, condemnation, criticism and ostracization in the life of transgender. (Gagne, Tewksbury, & McGaughey, 1997). As biological sex does not coincide with the gender identity, transgenders experience severe violence and harassment and most of them are subjected to housing and employment discrimination. (Clements-Nolle, Marx, Guzman, & Katz, 2001).

The most tragic findings are transgenders are less likely to receive any adequate medical facilities from health providers and criminal justice from court of law. (Witten & Eyler, 1999).

Since its inception, internet and mass media have played a pivotal role in improving the lives of the transgender by removing gender disparity and awaking common masses vis-à-vis the issues transgender face due to their gender identity.

A. Table Representing Viewpoint of Transgenders on Use of Internet and Mass Media in Transforming Their Lives

| SL.No | Name of the transgender | Age | Use of internet and mass media by transgenders in transgender upliftment |
|-------|-------------------------|-----|--|
| 1 | Sona | 21 | “I was completely unaware regarding the changes I was going through. Deep inside I knew that I was different from other people surrounding me. I was ashamed to discuss it with anyone. One day I saw an advertisement related to transgender and realized may be this is what I am. I was a victim of gender dysphoria but I gained clarity by coming across mass media stuff regarding transgender.” |
| 2 | Leela | 18 | I was not sure about my gender identity. Every time I was surrounded with a question whether am a girl or a boy? Sexually I was born as a boy but deep inside I felt as a girl. One day I saw a YouTube clip about the feelings of a transgender and then I was confirmed that I am a transgender. |
| 3 | Jasmine | 26 | I wanted to change my genitals but had no idea where to access it. Most of my friends who helped me in discovering medical facilities don't live anywhere near me. Through Tumblr I could gain information regarding the same and changed my sexual organs. |
| 4 | Ravina | 22 | I could not explain my parents what I was going through after repeated trails. One day I decided to show them the videos of transgender and made my mind to reveal the truth. My parents were disappointed by learning the truth but I felt relieved by making them understand what was I going through. By showing the video on transgender, they realized |

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| | | | the mental pressure I was dealing with and finally decided to access medical help. |
| 5 | Rekha | 15 | Things turned upside down when I realized that am a transgender. I felt that I will be secluded from the society and remain ostracized by my parents, friends and relatives. But when I came through the advertisement and you tube clips regarding transgender empowerment then I decided to come out. |
| 6 | Sheetal | 18 | My parents deserted me when they learnt that am a transgender. My friends and relatives completely abandoned me and criticized me for my gender identity. But I did not lose hope. Even if I could not go to school and college regularly because of the criticism faced by the cisgender I took the help of internet and completed my graduation. |
| 7 | Sulekha | 20 | Taking birth as a transgender is a challenge in itself. Facing the gender biased society who constantly mock your identity is the biggest hurdle in the way to succeed. I was highly demotivated due to constant bullying and even tried to end my life. But one day I saw the clipping of Shri Gauri Sawant and then realized how to succeed in my life as a transgender. I was highly inspired by the address of Laxmi Narayan Tripathy and Shri Gauri Sawant and today am living with no guilt rather with dignity. |

B. Table Representing Viewpoint of Cisgenderers on Use of Internet and Mass Media in Transforming Their Perceptions about Transgender

| SL. No | Name of the cisgender | Age | Use of internet and mass media by cisgender in transgender upliftment |
|--------|-----------------------|-----|--|
| 1 | B C Dash | 62 | When I was in my 20s, I was told that being transgender is a disease which cannot be cured and was asked to stay away from them. But with the development of mass media and internet, my perception towards the existence of transgender changed. I realized that they are equally eligible as cisgenderers and have every right to be a dignified citizen of the nation. |
| 2 | Priyam Jena | 34 | I only knew that transgender are the individuals whose gender identity does not match with their sexual organs. But with the help of mass media such as advertisement, YouTube videos, newspaper I realized that the life of transgender is very difficult and we need to support them instead of criticizing them for their gender identity as being transgender is not a matter of choice. |
| 3 | Khusboo Ghosh | 24 | I saw an advertisement where a transwoman has adopted a cisgender child and trying her best to give her a better future. Earlier I used to mock them but after seeing the clip I felt guilty and realized that transgender deserve equal respect as cisgender. |
| 4 | Sukanya Priyadarshini | 28 | I saw an episode in an Indian social entertainment show "Satyamev Jayate" regarding the acceptance of Alternative sexualities. A transgender named 'Gazal' who is a writer in film industry was interviewed and she explained her journey as a transgender. From her interview, I learnt that that life of transgender is so challenging and I |

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| | | | developed respect in my heart for the transgender who face so many hitches to grow in their life. |
| 5 | R K Swain | 31 | I saw a video related to transgender regarding coming out of Shivali who was misunderstood as gay but was a transgender. The video showed the difficulties she faced in her childhood and during her coming out. She was constantly bullied and abused for her identity and remained suppressed for many years but she created her own identity after facing many struggles and is remaining with her mother at Lucknow. From this video, I learnt how difficult the life of a transgender is and also changed my opinion regarding transgender. Even I gained a clear idea regarding the difference between gay and transgender. |
| 6 | Bishakha Samanta | 26 | As the issue of gender identity is a sensitive issue so I could not ask my queries to anyone openly. But through different articles and you tube videos regarding transgender, I gained clarity on concepts of transgender, transsexual, gender dysphoria and many other. |
| 7 | S Baliarsingh | 33 | As am doing research on transgender, it becomes very difficult for me to collect data regarding transgender as they are the marginalized section of the society. But by the use of internet I can reach large and diverse sample of transgender. Earlier I considered my task as a duty but by interacting with them, I learnt the difficulties they face in their life but still try their best to live their life in a dignified way. |

V. MAJOR CHALLENGES SOLVED THROUGH INTERNET AND MASS MEDIA:

A. Fulfilling Fundamental Gender Knowledge Gaps

Transgender persons are acknowledged in numerous indigenous, western, and eastern cultures and civilization from ancient times to the present day. However, the connotation of gender nonconformity may vary from culture to culture and from civilization to civilization. Many prominent researchers believed that biological factors such as genetic influences and prenatal hormone levels, early experiences, and experiences later in adolescence or adulthood may all contribute to the development of transgender identities. But mostly cisgender consider being transgender is a mental disease which remains uncured. However, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) "a psychological state is considered a mental disorder only if it causes significant distress or disability. Many transgender people do not experience their gender as distressing or disabling, which implies that identifying as transgender does not constitute a mental disorder (APA, 2013)." This was due to the lack of basic knowledge about transgender identity, transgender face the issue of gender dysphoria whereas cisgender remain transphobic. With the help of mass media and internet, cisgender masses are now aware about how transgender people often experience social exclusion as well as marginalization in the society that they reside in and, critically, from family, friends and relatives. Further most of the countries were not legally recognizing the gender identity of transgender masses, meaning they often disapproved their official identification, passports and travel rights, marital rights and certificates. But with the help of creating more awareness regarding transgender through mass media, most of countries have legalized them. Further the perception of common masses is changing enormously regarding transgender. According National Centre of Transgender equality, "More than one in four transgender people have lost a job due to bias, and more than three-fourths have experienced some form of workplace discrimination. Refusal to hire, privacy violations, harassment, and even physical and sexual violence on the job are common occurrences. In recent years, courts and federal agencies have increasingly taken the view that job discrimination against transgender people is prohibited by existing laws against sex discrimination. (NCTE, 2012)"

B. Awareness about Health and Education

Societal exclusion adversely hampers self-esteem as well as self-worth of transgender which ultimately push them towards depression, self-harm and substance abuse. Again, overlapping socio-cultural, legal and economic factors drags the section of transgender towards society's margin. Further, due to the ruthless attitude of masses of gender biased society, most of the transgenders are likely to remain dropped out of education, unattached friends, family and relatives and face rigid discrimination in workplace limiting their economic opportunities. Societal exclusion, economic vulnerability as well as lack of employment opportunities attract most of the transgender towards 'sex work' remaining

as the most viable form of livelihood. The strain of social isolation may indulge transgenders into drug and alcohol consumption which can push them towards committing suicide and to make them less likely to use condoms. Unfortunately, 90% of transgender people sell sex in India for their livelihood. [The Gap Report, 2014] Due to lack of knowledge about safe sex, HIV prevalence is around 9 times more for the transgender female sex workers in comparison with the non-transgender female sex workers [The Gap Report, 2014]. But with the help of awareness spreading through videos and advertisements, transgenders are made aware about safe sex and the measures to be followed to protect themselves from HIV.

Due to the persisting instinctive dislike for the transgender in India since ages, the health care providers refuse to treat them and the insurance provider deny to cover them under health insurance and life insurance schemes which made it difficult for transgenders to receive adequate medical treatment and health care facilities. But through different articles published in newspapers, journals, books regarding required health care facilities for transgenders, advertisement related to the recent transgender laws, made the life of transgender comparatively easier as they can extend access to health care facilities and life insurance services. Further, sexual transition was considered as a taboo in India. But with the growing technology, transgender are easily transforming their sexual organs through sex reassignment surgery and leading a satisfied life of their desired gender identity. However, a major transformation is recorded in the life of transgender through uplifting their socio-economic status via mass media.

C. Provision of Support Networks

It takes times for the society to accept the existence of transgenders. General isolation and social exclusion along with no organization or counselor to help left transgenders helpless to understand the changes they go through. However, social awareness for rights and problems faced by them through mass media has brought a whole lot change in positive way. Various support groups and organizations provide online support to the transgenders along with giving ample facilities and a platform to prosper. Many social sites (such as P2 Transgenders and Tumblr) with the features like blogging and forums has come up for transgender people where transgenders can come out and express their feelings, share their stories and support other peers. Many transgenders undergo depression and frustration associated with their gender identity. They can come in contact with the peers and get inspired from their real-life stories through social media and YouTube videos.

Due to social stigma and discrimination in medical settings, transgender patients are unable to access treatment. Consequently, transgender community turns to social media as a self-serve resource for medical knowledge which is quite risky. Despite accelerated growth in transgender health provision, discrimination is widely visible in most of the hospital. However, online treatment to transgender can reduce this risk of self-serve treatment by transgender and prohibit discrimination in medical settings in terms of gender.

D. Coming out: An Easier Task

With the awareness created by mass media and internet in relation to transgender, coming out of transgender can progressively change from scary and difficult to exciting and liberating. Coming out as a transgender is a personal choice which varies from coming out before sexual transition or coming out after sexual transition or not coming out at all.

With the fear of being misunderstood or disrespected or disbelieved or jeopardizing safety, health and living condition, most of the transgender refuse to come out which push them towards depression and frustration. As the society has not openly accepted transgender, it becomes difficult for them to come out and live their desired life. But with the help of online access with fellow transgenders from worldwide (connected through social sites), now transgenders can communicate with trans folks and discuss how and when to come out, how to face people after coming out, how to convince friends, family and relatives regarding their transition and many other queries. Further, most of the transgender prefer coming out in internet first providing an opportunity to themselves by coming across the existing experiences virtually without risking social sanctions in real world.

By coming across different articles regarding transition of a transgender, the parents of a transgender can clear their misconceptions and queries related to coming out of a transgender child. In most of the cases, it turns out to be a challenge for the transgender parents to ask questions about the transition in their transgender child from their friends and family. Thus, technology has made it easier by providing them access to fellow transgender parents via which they can share their views and feelings and would clarify their queries.

VI. RESULTS

Internet is a remarkable source of providing information, consultation as well as support to transgender individuals. Since its inception, internet and mass media have played a pivotal role in improving the lives of the transgender by removing gender disparity and awaking common masses vis-à-vis the issues transgender face due to their gender identity. The results of the paper are briefed in the given below of table.

C. TABLE REPRESENTING VIEWPOINT OF TRANSGENDERS ON USE OF INTERNET AND MASS MEDIA IN TRANSFORMING THEIR LIVES

| Sl.No | Names | Use of internet and mass media by transgender | Sources |
|-------|---------|---|--------------------|
| 1 | Sona | Gained clarity on gender dysphoria | Advertisement |
| 2 | Leela | Assurance about transgender identity | YouTube video |
| 3 | Jasmine | Gained information about sex | Tumblr application |

| Sl.No | Names | Use of internet and mass media by cisgender | Sources |
|-------|---------|--|--|
| 4 | Ravina | Convince parents regarding my transgender identity | Movie on transgender, internet, advertisements |
| 5 | Rekha | Decided to come out as a transgender | Mass media, advertisements, YouTube videos |
| 6 | Sheetal | Completed graduation with the help of internet | Tutorials in internet |
| 7 | Sulekha | Inspired by the address of Laxmi Narayan Tripathy and Shri Gauri Sawant and learnt to live life with dignity | YouTube clippings |

D. TABLE REPRESENTING VIEWPOINT OF CISGENDERS ON USE OF INTERNET AND MASS MEDIA IN TRANSFORMING THEIR PERCEPTIONS ABOUT TRANSGENDER

| Sl.No | Names | Use of internet and mass media by cisgender | Sources |
|-------|-------------|--|---|
| 1 | B C Dash | Transgender are equally eligible as cisgenders and have every right to be a dignified citizen of the nation. | Mass media and internet |
| 2 | Priyam Jena | Life of transgender is difficult and we need to support them instead of criticizing them for their gender identity as being transgender is not a matter of choice. | mass media such as advertisement, YouTube videos, newspaper |

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|---|-----------------------|--|--|
| 3 | Khusboo Ghosh | Realized transgender deserve equal respect as cisgender. | Advertisement in Starplus channel |
| 4 | Sukanya Priyadarshini | Developed respect for the transgenders who face so many hitches to grow in their life. | Indian social entertainment show "Satyamev Jayate" |
| 5 | R K Swain | Changed opinion regarding transgenders and gained a clear idea regarding the difference between gay and transgender. | coming out of Shivali in YouTube |
| 6 | Bishakha Samanta | Gained clarity on concepts of transgender, transsexual, gender dysphoria | Published Articles and YouTube videos |
| 7 | S Baliarsingh | Reached large and diverse sample of transgender for research | Tumblr and Grindr applications |

VII. CONCLUSION

Despite social exclusion and societal marginalization, the deprived transgender section has come a long way. They are not only harassed at educational and employment platform but are even denied equal treatment in every aspect. Internet, mass media and cyberspace is a revolutionary medium that has fostered changes in the socio-economic life of transgender. Internet is a remarkable source of providing information, consultation as well as support to transgender individuals. In one hand, it facilitates social interaction with peers which reduces their solitariness and in other hand helps in sharing their untold real-life secret experiences and activities. It also played a significant role in reducing organizational and administrative obstacles via political and social activism among networked transgenders. On identity level, cyberspace has provided an ideal platform for transgender individuals where they can come out without hiding their identity in the online world apart from the fear of social sanctions.

RECOMMENDATION

The gravity of the issues associated with transgender prejudices cannot be underestimated. From ages, transgenders are socially abandoned and economically forbidden in the society despite being a potential gender identity. Representation through realm of mass culture can remove the stigma associated with the transgender from Indian society. Media visibility in higher proportion will condense the sense of transphobia among the cisgender and will inspire fellow transgenders to come forward and fight for their right. Multiple transgender television characters and stories can endow empathy and compassion in cisgenders and can significantly change their attitude towards transgenders and related policies.

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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Ethical approval: The article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

Ethical approval: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study."

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