Online Communication in the Digital Age
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Lecture – 52
Theories of Gender in Digital Spaces

Good morning dear friends and welcome to this module. In the previous module, we had explored the intricacies of modern conversations related to sexuality and gender identity. Today, we shall further explore the factors contributing to the emergence or re-emergence of concepts related to choice and change in gender and sexuality within the context of digital mediums.
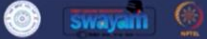

Digital interactivity, particularly in the context of digital media today, has played a significant role in reshaping how we conceptualize language, identity, subjectivity, gender and sexuality. Digital media has proven to be an efficient and effective tool for constructing, performing, recognizing, reflecting and self articulating individual as well as community identities. Web pages and various forms of digital communication are characterized by their perpetual state of being under construction, much like the continuous process of identity composition.

Today, we find that interactive ways of digital communication such as social networking pages, YouTube content, different types of online forums and image hosting

databases have become significant sites for expressing as well as for negotiating identity marked by debates around identity authenticity and encouraging self-reflectiveness. Digital media culture has facilitated the articulation of self labels for sexual and gender identity, challenging traditional binary based understandings of hetero and homo sexualities and exclusive gender categories. The relationship between communication, form, engagement and identity as constituted in discourse is crucial in understanding how contemporary digital media culture influences the process of identity formation.

New ways of thinking as well as new practices of identity formation have been facilitated by digital network engagement often referred to as attainment.

Digital technologies are thus integral to human relationality rather than being disruptive. Digital media does not create entirely new sexual and gender identity categories but instead of it, it prompts the production of both continuities as well as changes in existing cultural practices. Digital mechanisms enable the production of new taxonomies of gender and sexuality. Four critical aspects of digital media play a crucial role in this process and they are conveyance of discourse, interactivity and co-creation, social networking and identity performance and amplifying marginalized voices. Let us try to look at each of them.

Digital media serves as a platform for conveying a wide range of information including discourses related to gender and sexuality. This information introduces individuals to new categories, labels and ways of thinking about their identities.

Conveyance of Discourse

- Encountering new information and discourses in online settings can lead individuals to consider new forms of gender and sexual performativity.
  - For example, individuals may encounter terms like "heteroflexibility" or "non-binary" online, which can lead to reconfiguring their self-identity and stabilizing these new identities over time.
- However, simplistic "media effects" models attribute identity formation solely to online content.
- One must not disregard the importance of individual interpretation, critique, and self-reflection in identity construction.

Heteroflexible: Mostly straight, occasional same-gender attraction.
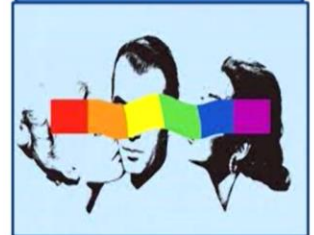
Source: www.health.com

Encountering new information and discourses in online settings can lead individuals to consider new forms of gender and sexual performativity. For examples, individuals may encounter terms like heteroflexibility or non-binary etc online which can lead to reconfiguring their self-identity and stabilizing these new identities over time. However, simplistic media effects models attribute identity formation solely to online content.

 One must not disregard the importance of individual interpretations, critique and self-reflection in identity construction. Butler's theory of identity as performance emphasizes that individuals enact societal norms and codes to construct their identity rather than expressing an inner truth. It highlights how gender and sexuality discourses are encountered from a young age and notes the significant influence of digital media as a source of sexual information and resources. In the context of digital media, a new framework for gender and sexuality has emerged challenging traditional norms, particularly for younger generations and offering alternative language and frameworks for identity. Underscores how digital media transforms the way individuals engage with and perceive their gender and sexual identities, introducing novel possibilities and

categories beyond conventional norms.

Interactivity and Co-Creation

- As opposed to previous linear discourses, digital interactivity allows users to actively engage, question, and interact with identity categories and signifiers.
  - Interactivity introduces users to the limitations of existing lists and prompts critical thinking about alternative ways of defining themselves.
- It emphasizes the co-creative nature of online engagement, where users actively contribute to creating identity discourses.
  - Through practices like remixing, users can alter and juxtapose existing media content to produce new meanings and challenge normative gender and sexual norms.
- This co-creation process can lead to unexpected and unanticipated categories, significantly affecting how individuals perceive and construct their identities.
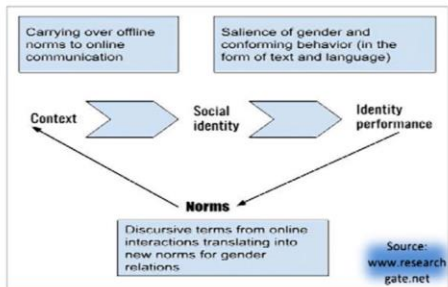
Source: elearningindustry.com

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Digital interactivity opposes the conventional and the previous linear discourses and it allows users to actively engage, question and interact with different identity categories and signifiers. It also emphasizes the co-creative nature of online engagement where users actively contribute to creating identity discourses. Through practices like remixing, users can alter and juxtapose existing media content to produce new meanings and challenge normative gender and sexual norms. This co-creation process can lead to, of course, unexpected and unanticipated categories significantly affecting how an individual perceives and also gradually learns to construct their identity. The interactivity and non-linear nature of the digital platforms aligns with Butler's theory of performativity as identity is actively reconstituted through encounters with new discourses facilitated by digital interactivity.

This practice adjusts representations of straight television characters by re-sequencing scenes, taking out of context clips, adding them to a meaningful song, all in order to queer the characters and make them appear to be in a romantic same-sex relationship.

Social Networking and Identity Performance

- Users actively engage with their identities through profile information, image uploads, and participation in conversations on social media.
- Simultaneously, social networking environments also challenge the coherence and stability of identities, revealing their constructed and unstable nature.
- Social networking exposes the breakdown of identity coherence over time, particularly in terms of traditional categories like hetero-/homo- or masculine/feminine.

Carrying over offline norms to online communication

Salience of gender and conforming behavior (in the form of text and language)

Context → Social identity → Identity performance

Norms

Discursive terms from online interactions translating into new norms for gender relations

Source: www.research gate.net

- These platforms facilitate self-reflective interactions with identity.
- It also provides opportunities for the flaws in identity performance to surface publicly.

Users actively engage with their identities through profile information, image uploads and participation in conversations on social media platforms. Simultaneously, social networking environments also challenge the coherence and stability of identities, revealing their constructed and unstable nature. Social networking exposes the breakdown of identity coherence over time, particularly in terms of traditional categories like hetero and homo or masculine and feminine. These platforms facilitate self-reflective interactions with identity and also provide opportunities for the flaws in identity performance to surface publicly.

 It also demonstrates how the shortcomings of traditional identity labels, such as lesbian, etc., are exposed when they fail to accommodate the complexities and nuances of individuals' experiences. As a result, users may actively search for and promote better categories, for example, heteroflexible or demi-girl, to enhance identity coherence and to better represent their experiences and desires. This reflects the evolving nature of gender and sexual identity in the digital age.

Amplifying Marginalised Voices

- Digital media plays a significant role in bringing together voices that do not conform to conventional gender and sexuality norms, fostering the emergence of new identity categories.
  - These digital communities provide a platform for individuals to challenge dominant, expert-derived discourses that perpetuate restrictive binary-based identity norms.
- A notable example is the development of the "Furry" community, which revolves around dressing as non-human anime characters and can involve deep subjective identification.

- This community was formed by gathering dispersed voices online, creating a shared language and sense of identity.

Source: www.wikipedia.in

Furry Fandom is a subculture interested in anthropomorphic animal characters

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Digital media also plays a significant role in amplifying marginalized voices.

It brings together voices that do not conform to conventional gender and sexuality norms and fosters the emergence of new identity categories. A notable example is the development of the furry community, which revolves around dressing as non-human anime characters and can involve deep subjective identification. Furry Foundation is a subculture interested in anthropomorphic animal characters. This community was formed by gathering dispersed voices online, creating a shared language and a sense of identity. The conditions enabling the formation of a furry community are similar to those that contribute to establishing the new taxonomy of gender and sexuality norms.

Sexual Citizenship

- Sexual citizenship is a cultural and discursive framework that re-conceptualizes sexuality, encouraging self-definition in terms of personal and collective identities.
  - It intersects with gender and sexual experiences, functioning at the interface between the private and public spheres.
    - It allows individuals to assert their sexual attributes and claim recognition and rights, particularly in the context of same-sex marriage and marriage equality movements.
- It also highlights the neoliberal framing of sexual citizenship, emphasizing the subsumption of everything into market relationships and the role of consumption in shaping identity.
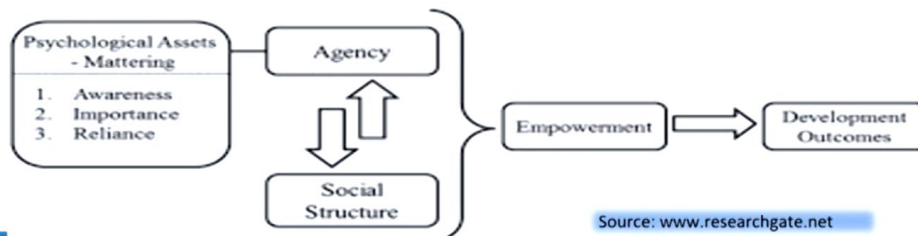
The acknowledgement of one's right to sexual self-determination, and the recognition of that equivalent. right in others.

Sexual citizenship is a cultural and discursive framework that re-conceptualizes sexuality, encouraging self-definition in terms of personal and collective identities. It intersects with gender and sexual experiences, functioning at the interface between the private and the public spheres. It also highlights the neoliberal framing of sexual citizenship, emphasizing the subsumption of everything into market relationships and the role of consumption in shaping identity. Neoliberalism encourages subjects to view themselves as investments, managing their subjectivity through a marketplace of sexual and gender categories. This perspective leads to the proliferation of labels that make identification more efficient and contribute to the economy of sexual explanatory discourse.

While sexual citizenship can promote a more livable society for those who do not identify with dominant norms, it is also in service to biopolitical governance technologies and neoliberal marketization. The relationship between anti-capitalism and anti-heteronormativity becomes complex and the proliferation of identity labels mirrors the demands for economic growth blurring the lines between labels as identifiers of goods and identity labels. Let us now look at the underlying factors that give rise to or reintroduce the concepts of choice and change within the realms of gender and sexuality.

- Empowerment has become a central theme in discussions about sex, sexual practices, and sexuality in the early 21st century, drawing from contemporary feminist discourse.
  - This concept suggests that confident choices made in the context of sexual practices and representation are experienced as empowering and agentic.
- Empowerment and agency, together provide a framework for understanding sexual identity as a matter of both change and choice, where individuals may choose to make changes to their sexual identities and practices based on their sense of empowerment and agency.

Source: www.researchgate.net

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Empowerment and agency together provide a framework for understanding sexual identity as a matter of both change and choice, where individuals may choose to make changes to their sexual identities and practices based on their sense of empowerment and agency. The figure below also illustrates this idea in detail. For instance, Cynthia Nixon, a well-known film actress, suggests that her sexual identity is a choice, emphasizing her right to define her sexuality. She rejects the idea that she was mistaken about her sexuality and suggests that for her, choosing her sexual identity is a valid and empowering decision.

The emergence of a wide range of identity labels for sexuality and gender is closely tied to the culture of choice within neoliberal societies.

 This culture emphasizes the freedom to choose and create one's identity, although it operates within certain frameworks that encourage only specific choices. Subjects are encouraged to define their subjecthood in relation to societal norms and distributional curves of normativity, participating in the marketized framework of identity formation. Within this neoliberal context, individuals engage in self-reflection that goes beyond assessing their conformity to social norms. Self-reflexivity takes two forms. Firstly, as a means of measuring personal change and adaptation, and secondly, as a set of practices related to making decisions about self-representation and subjecthood.

 Contemporary youth, framed as consumers and choice makers, experience their selfhood within a neoliberal framework. Their sexual citizenship and expression of sexual identity are often limited to the individualized and private sphere. The political nature of choice as seen in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s in terms of trans identity online has also gradually evolved and changed.

In the current setting, choices and changes in identity are delinked from the political context. While past choices could be deeply political, contemporary society tends to push these choices into the civil and private aspects of our life, particularly within the context of consumption.

This conceals the social and relational nature in which choices are made. The emphasis on the individual as a choosing self masks the influence of social regimentation and discourse, highlighting choice, agency, and change as symbols of livability and authenticity. The neoliberal social milieu fosters a discourse that at least entertains the idea of choosing one's sexuality. Digital culture also plays a significant role in promoting choice, change, and transition as forms of play within the realm of identity. It is closely intertwined with practices of identity that allow for these elements while preserving authenticity.

The early 1990s, Web 1.0 version of the internet provided a space where users could experiment with different and often entirely new online identities. It was primarily text-based and lacked the broadband and real-time capabilities of modern internet platforms, allowing users to explore identities free from constraints like gender, demeanor, and physical appearance. This period created a disjuncture between the concept of the real that is embodied and constrained, and the virtual that is mind-play performance agency, leading to philosophies like cyberpunk. Users could engage in online identity experimentation, challenging unitary identity concepts. This online play involved choice and change separated from everyday life, adhering to Johan Huizinga's definition of play as a temporary sphere of activity.

Today's digital culture characterized by platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Tumblr has moved beyond text-based interactions and reintegrated the body and ordinary self. Identity play that involves misrepresenting oneself is now seen as identity fraud.

Consciously or unconsciously, users now engage in what is known as self-curation. They curate online artefacts across multiple platforms. This self-curation is a performative way of expressing an articulating identity, which is very close to offline behaviour like walking, speaking, and comporting oneself.

Users can choose and change what artefacts they present online to create a specific self-image. They can revise, modify, delete these representations over time. This self-curation is also influenced by platform structures and algorithms. However, this self-curation is influenced by the structures and algorithms of the platform, and of course, advertising also affects how one's identity is perceived. Despite the freedom for choice and change, the digital landscape has constraints on identity work.

In this context, we can refer to the work of Sara Ahmed and Lisa Diamond. Sara Ahmed's work highlights the diversity of experiences related to individuals' choice and changes in their sexual and gender identities. Lisa Diamond's research points out that men and women may experience their sexual identities differently. Men are often depicted as having stable sexual identities consistent across their life spans, while women may not easily fit into this framework. Sara Ahmed, like Judith Butler, introduces the idea of stabilisation in identity development.

A performative subjectivity involves a process of developing stability over time. This stability is achieved through the repetition of categories into which a subject is interpolated, although the categories themselves may remain unstable. Digital communication has made these experimentations easier and provide support.

- Vivienne Cass (1979) proposed a model featuring six stages in the construction of identity for young gay men, progressing from 'identity confusion' to the establishment of a homosexual self-image characterized by 'identity tolerance,' leading to 'identity pride,' culminating in the synthesis of a homosexual identity as an essential but not exclusive aspect of one's 'self.'
    - Cass's model was valuable for illustrating how identity is constructed and influenced by available resources and recognition.
- However, it retained an element of fixity by implying the existence of a pre-existing identity characterized by confusion and desire, serving as the foundation for the six-stage pattern.

Vivienne Cass
Source: www.linkedin.com

Another critic whose work we can refer to at this point is Vivienne Cass. She had proposed a model featuring six stages in the construction of identity for young gay men, progressing from identity confusion to the establishment of a homosexual self-image, characterized by identity tolerance, leading to identity pride, and culminating in the synthesis of a homosexual identity as an essential but not exclusive aspect of oneself.

This model was valuable for illustrating how identity is constructed and influenced by available resources and recognition. However, it retained an element of fixity by implying the existence of a pre-existing identity, characterized by confusion and desire, and serving as the foundation for the six-stage pattern. Although Cass did not suggest specific origins, her model had assumed a foundational desire pre-categorized by the researcher's perspective. Digital mediums facilitate expression, admission of desires, and seeking support through online platforms. They also provide the much-needed anonymity in case it is needed.

- Much of the literature on LGBT youth identity development has been influenced by ideas of progress.
- However, an alternative perspective emerges when considering concepts of choice and change as conveyed through orientation and stabilization.
  - Rather than adhering to the idea of uniform linear progression, this viewpoint suggests that stabilization and orientation result from disjunction and disruption.
  - Importantly, certain situations prompt individuals to make choices interpellated by their social positioning.
- In such cases, individuals may be called upon to decide whether they want to express their identity through relationships with gendered objects of attraction or if gender will be irrelevant to their self-concept.

Change → Transition → Adaptation

Identity Development

Much of the literature on LGBT youth identity development has been influenced by ideas of progress. However, an alternative perspective emerges when considering concepts of choice and change as conveyed through orientation and stabilization. Rather than adhering to the idea of a uniform linear progression, this viewpoint suggests that stabilization and orientation result from disjunction and disruption. Importantly, certain situations prompt individuals to make choices interpolated by their social positioning. In such cases, individuals may be called upon to decide whether they want to express their identity through relationship with gendered objects of attraction or if gender will be irrelevant to their self-concept.

Furthermore, individuals might reconsider and choose their gender identification based on their evolving sense of sexual identity. However, this process of choice is not simple. Instead, it is a process where individuals undergo a reconstitution. This concept of choice does not necessarily imply agency in the traditional sense. Rather, it suggests that choices have material consequences influencing how individuals experience the possibilities and limitations of attraction based on predefined categorizations.

As is typical in identity development, this process is diverse and experienced differently by different individuals.

- In the context of the new framework of sexual identity labels, these mechanisms for shaping concepts of choice and change become particularly relevant, and they are more likely to be experienced within this evolving taxonomy.
  - This is because the traditional rigid binary classification of heterosexual and homosexual, which previously constrained the meaning of sexuality, has been displaced in this emerging discourse.
  - As a result, there is now reduced rigidity and regimentation over time.
    - For example, someone who previously identified as heterosexual, experienced desires exclusively directed toward the 'opposite sex,' and expressed their attractions and experiences in line with traditional heterosexual norms might, within this new discourse, undergo what seems like a 'discovery.'
- This discovery is not necessarily a sudden change but rather a reconstitution of their subjectivity.
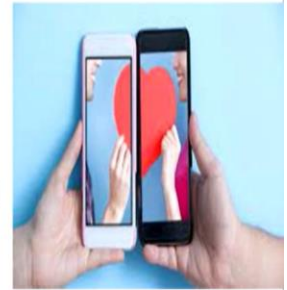
Source: www.unesco.org
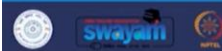
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This discovery is not necessarily a sudden change but rather a reconstitution of one's subjectivity. This reconstitution could lead to a new self-identification and may enable the individual to experience attractions and desires they had not previously encountered and it may also potentially broaden the range of their gender identities.

Conclusion

- These factors reveal a complex interplay of elements in the digital age, where interactivity, identity performativity, social networking, and the formation of online communities actively challenge traditional gender and sexual norms.

- While digital media has expanded the possibilities for understanding and expressing one's identity, it is essential to critically examine how these developments intersect with neoliberalism and market-driven ideologies.

- The revised taxonomy of gender and sexual identities is a dynamic and evolving space shaped by the active engagement of individuals and the broader cultural and economic context.

Source: www.isp.page.com

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These factors reveal a complex interplay of elements in the digital age where interactivity, identity performativity, social networking, and the formation of online communities actively challenge traditional gender and sexual norms. While digital media has expanded the possibilities for understanding and expressing one's identity, it is essential to critically examine how these developments intersect with neoliberalism and market-driven ideologies. The revised taxonomy of gender and sexual identities is a dynamic and evolving space shaped by the active engagement of individuals and the broader cultural and economic context.

 In the next module, we will talk about digital feminist interventions, online gender performances through hashtag activism and the gender-based violence mediated online. Thank you.