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Social media platforms and the gender diverse: An ambivalent relationship

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Abstract

Man is a social animal by nature and interacting and communicating with others is a basic human need. We need to connect with others and feel connected with others. Psychology explains that we have an innate and a very powerful need to belong. A failure to do so results in an acute sense of loneliness or social isolation. Lack of appropriate social contact proves to be detrimental to one's mind and body resulting in physiological and psychological disturbances. In the twenty-first century technological social media platforms like face book, twitter have replaced the traditional methods of mass mobilization providing a platform to connect far and wide and interact by creating an online audience specific self sustaining interactive environment especially for the socially isolated and marginalized LGBTQ population. Social Media facilitates discussion, inspire action and enables engagement. It provides visibility and recognition to their experiences voicing their concerns into the mainstream consciousness.

Social networking undoubtedly allows the gender diverse to garner psychosocial support worldwide but at the same time it encourages online victimization and cyber bullying, invasion of privacy and spamming. The absence of an effective gatekeeper to monitor online content posits many such issues. The negatives of social networking avenues notwithstanding, it acts as an empowering tool for the gender diverse to challenge the status quo and be seen and heard.

Keywords: Social media, Gender Diverse, Communication, Challenges, Global Inclusion, Cyber bullying

Introduction

Human beings essentially need to communicate with one another not only to express themselves but also to develop interpersonal relationships and formulate a community to which he can belong. During the process of Evolution, The human beings evolved into social beings as a result of their phylogenetic history. Even biologically our bodies tend to perform better when we are not alone. Evolution has shown that attachment in an infant is essential for its survival (Bowlby, 1969) [2]. Psychology explains that we have an innate and a very powerful need to belong Every person yearns for acknowledgement (recognition of an individual), approval (evaluation of the individual) and acceptance (reception in a larger group). Individuals feel safe and appreciated when they actively engage in social relationships, they feel connected and significant and derive a purposeful existence. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs; belongingness is one of the most basic and fundamental (deficiency) needs after safety and health. It makes us feel content and happy and secure being approved by others. It is responsible for encouraging a sense of positive self worth and self esteem.

A failure to do so results in an acute sense of loneliness or social isolation which can be defined as an absence of contact between individuals. Lack of appropriate social contact proves to be detrimental to one's mind and body. Research has significantly indicated that social relationships are associated with a variety of co morbid conditions with a concurrent existence. Many physiological disturbances develop as a result of poor social interaction like high blood pressure, cardiovascular diseases, cognitive decline (Emerson, and Jayani 2015) [4].

The Archives of General Psychiatry states that Alzheimer's disease is twice as likely to develop in lonely people. Feelings of social isolation are linked to alterations in the activity of genes that control inflammation. A condition of perceived social isolation (PSI) creates a situation of anxiety leading to the release of cortisol; a hormone released in times of duress which increases the glucose levels in the body and activates it. Psychologically also the impact of social isolation is all encompassing for positive mental health. It is known to lead to severe depression (Hawkley and Capitano 2015) [13], significant periods of restlessness

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And poor quality of sleep (Cacioppo *et al* 2002) ^[15]. PSI is also known to be associated with an increased risk of suicidal ideation (Hirsch *et al* 2012) ^[14].

In the twenty-first century we live in a world which is fast moving and constantly changing. Social media like face book twitter have replaced the traditional methods of mass mobilization like newspapers and radio and television. It provides us with a platform to connect with each other and become actively involved in the sharing experiences irrespective of the geographic difference that separates people, enable them to widen their personal knowledge and also discover things they did not know earlier. social media not only offers worldwide connectivity vis a vis the locally or nationally based newspaper but is also open for conversation at all times. it is a medium of communication which brings us all together and is easily accessible.

Social media in today's day and age is proving to be a strong catalyst for social change. It is responsible for major restructuring of communication at the global level and altering our fundamental perceptions about it. Replacing the traditional tools of mass media, the social media has played a pivotal role in connecting with a vast majority of audience across the globe creating a very sensitive digital arena susceptible to both the good and the bad. It provides the user with unlimited freedom of expression and has become an extremely powerful platform for giving a voice to the voiceless millions thus leading to the empowerment of the individual as well as the community at large. From the traditional dissemination of information the social media has transformed into an instrument of awareness and advocacy The mass engagement has resulted in bringing about an evolutionary change in the social fabric of the society. It seeks to give a perception of participation and belonging. One such group is the population of gender diverse individuals who are shunned from the mainstream society by virtue of not belonging to the socially accepted gender binary. Trans phobic attitude and deep seated discrimination and humiliation faced by the gender fluid persons forces them to lead lives out of stealth. They mask their real identities and repress their innermost desire of being accepted for who they are. They are disowned by their own families and ridiculed by society at large. Many a times they are subjected to violence and hate crimes. Because of their gender orientation and sexuality LGBTQ are marginalized and denied the most basic human rights even like the right to education vocational opportunities and essential healthcare. Thus for a collective with a plethora of social challenges the phenomenon of social networking has emerged as a boon. It allows the extremely vulnerable population of gender non conforming to gain an authentic status. Their genders are understood as superficial and illegitimate. They are made to fight for the privilege of essence, argue for their existence. Faced with such discrimination and harassment the gender diverse often lack a safe venue to express themselves all the while connecting with one another. Social networking serves as a platform for establishing social ties gaining visibility and sharing of information and even resources which the marginalized gender diverse community is bereft of the contemporary digital media offers the gender diverse representations in the form of online communities which act as a safe haven for them and facilitate sharing of uncensored experiences, and

confirmation of their gender identity. Social Networking addresses the following concerns of the gender diverse:

- **Awareness and Sensitization:** The social networking sites permit the gender diverse to access information about healthcare policies and sexualities without feeling awkward or humiliated, it acts as a social enterprise raising awareness and sensitizing individuals across the globe to the variety of challenges faced by the Gender diverse. For instance The Human Rights Campaign launched in 2013 highlighting the issue of equality for the gender diverse has 1.5 million members and supporters worldwide. Similarly The It Gets Better Project initiated in 2010 after two teenage suicides in USA to reach out to the LGBTQ community by uploading similar testimonials of bullying harassment and intolerance in order to encourage each other to overcome the various social impediments that they face. More than 50,000 testimonials (and counting) were uploaded. Better still For the parents and families of the gender diverse individuals social network offers a forum dedicated to providing support disseminating information and resources among parents with gender diverse children and allows them an opportunity to understand the psychosocial concerns and apprehensions faced by their children so that they in turn can modify and facilitate parenting practices to ensure positive mental health outcomes. Social networking is highly useful and productive simply because it provides a sizeable audience across the globe far more than the traditional instruments of mass media could ever accomplish. Thus awareness and sensitization is the only mechanism which can be effectively used for bringing about equality and justice for the gender diverse by creating an environment of tolerance empathy and regard and bridging the gap between the heterosexual population and the gender diverse.
- **Social Support:** Social networking and social media has emerged as a valuable mechanism of interaction and communication useful in mobilizing support for the issues and concerns of the gender diverse. According to a statistical report presented by England's Department of Culture, Media, and Sport in April 2016, 89.5% of Gender diverse used social media outlets as compared to 70.1% of the general non LGBTQ population. It not only facilitates interpersonal interaction but also ensures privacy and anonymity if so desired. The virtual community recommends an ideal place to know one another and explore our similarities and differences. It provides them with a sense of belonging and connectedness, an ease which enables them to truly express themselves. A significant body of research indicates that LGBTQ use the social networking sites to deal with the various social challenges and daily life issues concerning them like finding a partner or dealing with social isolation. (Hillier and Harrison 2007: Hillier 2001) ^[6, 7]. More and more gender diverse individuals use the social media to come out of the closet or publically disclose their gender orientation. Since the gender diverse are marginalized and stigmatized online avenues offer greater visibility which in turn helps in

breaking down of prejudices and stereotypical notions and encourages equality. Allport's (1954) ^[1] intergroup contact theory states intergroup interactions reduce the conflict fear anxiety and prejudice that one group has towards another group and increases mutual empathy and understanding. Social media also allows heteronormative individuals to interact with the gender diverse thus enabling them to understand each other's perspective and foster cordial relations creating an inclusive and harmonious society. According to Cobb's Buffer model social support acts as a buffer to protect against stress in life and induces a sense of overall well being. It reduces tension and is an instrument of increased self esteem, satisfaction and happiness. (Cobb, 1976) ^[3].

- **Agency for change:** From the traditional dissemination of information the social media has transformed into an instrument of awareness and advocacy. It is no longer only a platform for the self obsessed or for entertainment but has metamorphosed into a sphere of sociopolitical advancement. The social media has in the contemporary era acquired an unbridled force of power which should be used for the improvement and betterment of the society for instance ensuring empowerment to the women questioning state policies and providing agency to the voiceless, to name a few. It does so by creating an online audience specific self sustaining interactive environment. These Online communities are a collective of likeminded individuals who come together in the virtual world and discuss things they like and even establish relationships. Community members do not necessarily know each other in order to share ideas or develop a sense of bonding. Social Media facilitates discussion inspire action and enables engagement. It offers a direct avenue to discuss relevant issues, it provides visibility and recognition to their experiences. It is also useful in cutting across societal disparities and reach out to people not potentially acknowledged or recognized and community specific voices into a collective consciousness and an opportunity for sharing of experiences Digital social media provide a range of different platforms that are being utilized in different ways and used for various purposes as they are shaped by and shaping the more specific cultural, social and economic means and positions of LGBTQ youth raise awareness and responsiveness. For instance a Face book campaign to highlight issues of the gender diverse proves to be inexpensive accessible to all and a highly effective way to disseminate outreach messages.
- **Global Inclusion:** The social media is breaking barriers of hierarchy, region, language age and cultural boundaries to reach your doorstep. No matter where we are located or which religion we belong to whether we are living in distinct cultures are rich or poor, we have the prospect of connecting with each other irrespective of the boundaries that separate us. Social networking via social media offers worldwide connectivity to people ideas messages and organizations. The world has transformed into a global village where distance and isolation have been rendered meaningless. It does not entail any physical presence to be connected only

requiring a mental connect. It offers socially meaningful structures which transcend our neighborhood and are multiethnic, multicultural and, multiregional in their approach. Also the efficiency with which the digital interactions take place increases the velocity and density of the messages communicated serving as a social catalyst seeking to bring about a change and alter the hegemonic supremacy of the complex social structures. Social media is for everyone and is considered highly useful and productive simply because it provides a sizeable audience across the globe far more than the traditional instruments of mass media could ever accomplish. The efficiency and the convenience with which social networks function is responsible for increasing their accessibility manifold. A transgender adolescent living in a remote rural part of India can belonging to a virtual community can influence campaign and participate in the outreach program undertaken by an organization in USA within minutes round the clock all at an inexpensive cost of a few rupees. The prospect of shrinking the world at large so much so that every human being is a potential user have significant implications for real time communication.

- **Individual and Collective empowerment:** We have seen that social networking sites have become a bona fide venue for interpersonal interactions where information and resources are shared and opinions are expressed. Using video diaries, v blogs blogs and several such tools the gender diverse are co creating and sharing their experiential realities. It draws attention to major issues and apprehensions surrounding gender diversity. It increases in group visibility and allows the non binary people to find each other and connect with solidarity. Social networking sites also act as sites of crisis intervention and promote strategies for resisting a hostile and stressful environment embedded with stigma and prejudice. The fraternity of the collective engagement leads to the empowerment of the gender diverse to deal with the challenges and vulnerabilities on a day to day basis. The members of the group also identify with positive role models and social support offered leading to mutual inspiration and motivation while fostering resilience; photos testimonials and v diaries, opinions express phenomenological experiences as technology becomes more and more integrated with our lives. Social Media is often used to design specific advocacy campaigns which are tailor made to suit the needs and requirements of the gender diverse who are already distressed and vulnerable, who can then draw strength and agency from the collective discourse and are more comfortable with their own identities (Ciszek, 2017) ^[5]. The twenty first century has seen an unprecedented influence exerted by the social media in terms of helping individuals to connect with each other formulate support groups and seek information; the negative effects of same cannot be overlooked. On one hand it offers an interactive platform for the distressed and marginalized gender diverse population to engage with people with similar interests and orientations social networking sites also encourage cyber bullying and hostility. In a study Out Online: The experiences of

lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth on the Internet (GLSEN, 2013) states that LGBTQ youth experience nearly three times as much bullying and harassment online as non LGBTQ youth. The campaigns launched in the arena of social media with the purpose of promoting visibility to the gender diverse and encouraging disclosure of their true gender identities are potentially more threatening leading to online victimization. The gender diverse individuals face a lot of hostility and bullying in real life situations and as an extension as it were, their coming out process also makes them vulnerable to online bullying shaming and abuse.

Creation of an online Persona: All social networking platforms require the user to put up a "profile" consisting of one's personal information which could be an image far from reality uploaded for the purpose of Impression Management. A curated expression of the self which is deliberately fashioned to put forth a positive self image to belie the existing actuality in order to fool and mislead others, exploiting the vulnerability of the gender diverse individuals.

Invasion of Privacy: The social media has access to the personal information like email location name age and other details which when disclosed can lead to serious endangering of ones privacy. It can (and very often does) result in cyber stalking where the stalker has access to and uses personal information available in the cyber world to pursue and harass you; Theft of identity wherein anyone with access can assume your identity and pretend to be you thus leaving your safety security and affiliations exposed and vulnerable. Spamming or the availability of online personal content put up for sale for anyone interested in purchasing it including political activists or being targeted by online predators especially in case of the gender diverse persons thus rendering them defenceless.

The careful management of expectations is very difficult on the social networking forums because there are no effective filters which can sift through the information or content being posted. It may engender myths and misinformation since it lacks a professional gatekeeper to monitor the content which is put out there resulting in evasion of trust and disenchantment.

Conclusion

The social network offers a safe space to the gender diverse. It not only offers a reassuring experience but also positive affirmation because it makes them feel less isolated and discriminated. It encourages them to raise their voice and be a part of the mainstream consciousness leading to their social inclusion. However like every beautiful flower that has thorns aplenty many negatives haunt this relationship like online rejection and victimization of the gender diverse, Hate crimes and invasion of privacy to name a few but these are not limited to the gender diverse population. Almost anyone with an expressed opinion is trolled on the social media. Overall I personally feel that the benefits of social networking far outweigh its disadvantages. The support structure provided by the social networks to the gender diverse has helped immensely in raising awareness empathy and integration for them at large.

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