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Social Media as a Space for Queer Visibility: Perspectives from Queer Youths in Assam

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Abstract:

Assam is a northeastern state of India comprising of different cultural tribes, sub-tribes and ethnoses. During the past few years, the queer movement in Assam has gained attention and different creative spaces including literature, films etc. have started to space it consciously. While, many queer individuals from Assam are coming out with their gender identity, many are facing consequences including stigma, disowning and social exclusion. The present study focus on how social media impacts the daily life of a queer individual in place like Assam. The purpose of the study is fundamentally to identify the queer individual experiences in the dynamics of the current media. The study is concerned with the question of gender and sexuality in the recent network culture. It seeks to address the questions of intimacy and culture in relation of sexuality in the undercurrents of social media. The research question is whether social media strengthens queer identity in Assam or not. The study is carried on with purposive sample (N=8) from both urban and rural cases of Assam. It is expected to identify the role of social media in strengthening the queer life from socio-cultural dynamics.

Keywords: Heteronormativity, Gender Diversity, Queer, Queer Visibility, Social Media

INTRODUCTION:

In the margin areas of Assam, the queer youths are coming out even after the possibility of facing stigmas, violence and bullying. Typically, higher educational institutions' heteronormative ideas and practices influence the self-understanding and empowerment process of the queer students. While individuals from various gender identity are finding social media as a most convincing medium of expressing their self as they are, at the same time social media is also showing brutal reality of the society in terms of homophobia. Social media is that platform where the LGBTQ youths get the opportunity to network, get informed and support each other. This in turn may have beneficial effects for this secluded group. It is also notable that social media has become the connecting link in visibility

of the LGBTQ individuals. But, there are also issues of discrimination against queers are emerging with extended use of social media. The queer individuals in Assam have started to open up through the different prevalent media including Facebook, Instagram, Grindr, Blued etc. While many queer have come out in social media sites, many have to face unpleasant experiences including bullying, harassment etc. This study is focused upon exploring the role of social media in identity-confirmation and self-acceptance of the queer individuals in Assam. The objective of this study is to identify the scope of social media in strengthening the identity, awareness and empowerment of queer youths in Assam. While higher education spaces should function as the space for autonomy and self-expression, in many cases, their heteronormative culture obstacles the queer visibility. In Assam, social media pages and groups have become the safest and widely used space for the queer youths. But, is it always safe? Does it always support queer visibility in constructive and progressive way? Typically, social media users have more common users from the same society. As a result, there is probability of reflection of the heteronormative ideals and homophobic attitudes in the social media platform as well. This study addresses the question how far social media accelerate queer visibility in Assam. This study also seeks to explore the question in what way social media functions as a space for visibility for the queer youths in Assam.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The process of socialization of a youth is often influenced by various factors including observation, learning, knowing, and understanding. Cass (1979), Williams (1990) and Troiden (1988) asserts that the identification and socialization process is guided by learning through direct questioning, observation, and subjective experiences. In case of the LGBTQ individual, the process of socialization and its experience are different from that of their heterosexual peers. Though queer youths' experiences are distinct, the coming out process is the common element in socialization (Cass, 1979, Williams, 1990, Troiden, 1988). Regarding the coming out process of the LGBTQ individual different theorists have argued from different perspectives. Among those, some common similarities may be drawn out. In this regard we may refer to Troiden's concept of Sensitization Stage. According to Troiden (1988), awareness of being different arises during the sensitization stage, leading to questioning their assigned heterosexual or cisgender identity. This is the stage when an individual starts to search for information to learn more about what he or she is feeling. Within this stage experiencing confusion and turmoil may bring some individuals to a subsequent period called 'assumption stage'. Efforts for rejection or reframing own identity is very common at this stage leading to initiation of the process of self-acceptance (Troiden, 1988). Gradually, the individuals start to reveal their identity to other. They look for alike acquaintances, social bond, and role models to learn the techniques of validating their identity. It is the stage of Commitment in which the individuals embrace their identity and are ready to disclose more widely to others (Troiden, 1988). Fox (2016) remarked, 'During any of

these formative stages, it is likely that LGBTQ individuals seek out information and attempt to learn more about their identity’.

Though not exactly similar to Troiden’s concept, Goffman's, *Presentations of Self in Everyday Life*, provides a dramaturgical lens to understand the queer ‘performances’ in varied settings (Brickell, 2005; Coley, 2020; LaVoi & Glassford, 2021; Nealy, 2017). The performance of self of an individual who is on the process of exploring his LGBTQ identity may become very challenging. Regarding performance, Goffman has conceptualized the idea of Front Region. This idea of Front Region can be extended to what Duguay (2016) observed that the ‘presentation of self’ in the virtual platforms by the young queers can be exacting to manage. In this context, Duguay has referred to Marwick & Boyd’s ‘context collapse’ meaning engagement in manifold performances simultaneously in social media platforms potentially presenting their multiple versions which makes it difficult to manage how others are seeing them. Goffman's ‘Front Region’ means a performance space where an individual aims to act as he or she wants to be seen, playing to his or her audience (1959: 110). The difficulty of managing front region performances in social media is highlighted by Context Collapse, where a condensation of spatial, worldly, and social boundaries exists without face-to-face encounters (Duguay, 2016).

The study by Mitchell et al. (2014) conducted in US suggests significant difference among youth on the basis of sexual orientation in relying on virtual sources for sexual health information. 78% of queer youth population of the study uses online sources in order to get information on in comparison to that of 19% of heterosexual youth population. On the standpoint of Mitchell *et. al.*’s study, argument can be placed that the presence in social media is an essential dimension for queer supportive organizations. The queer youths seek out information and learn about the related elements of LGBTQ identity and experiences mostly through other sources, frequently social media (De Haan et al., 2013, Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011).

Media plays multifaceted role in the process of self-awareness of the queer individuals and development of their identity (e.g., Bond et al., 2009, Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011). Notably, various issues are also emerging in regard to the online representation of the LGBTQ individuals. The relatively uncommon representation of queer lives in mainstream media is one of the major issues (Brown, 2002, Gross, 1991). In recent years, the portrayal of LGBTQs have become more frequent, yet, the portrayals has remained still limited (Gross, 2012). According to Bond (2014) and Kelso (2015), ‘gay men are featured far more frequently than other groups while other identities remain nearly invisible. Further, these depictions are often stereotyped or otherwise bowdlerized’ (Bond, 2014, Gross, 2012), and therefore provide limited learning opportunities’. Fox and Ralston (2016) opined that among the LGBTQ individuals, the informal type of learning through social media is very common. Social media functions as an information source for the queer individuals. Similarly, the

study by Miller, asserts that online networking sites including the social media functions as a space to individuals to explore their gender identity. Differences may be noticed in the results of the studies on effects of social media on queer over the years. Studies conducted a decade ago including the studies of Chong et al. (2015), Ceglarek and Ward (2016) affirmed that social media usage was related to the better well-being of the queer individuals. But studies conducted during the recent years show a change in this relation of social media use and well-being of queer individuals. The studies by Lowe Calverley et al. (2019), Keles et al. (2020) suggest association between social media and psychological issues including anxiety, depression and distress for the queer individuals. Huang (2017)'s meta-analysis identifies low correlation between the time vested in social media and psychological well-being. However, there is to be found hardly any such in-depth study on the queer individuals in the context of Assam. Moreover, most of the studies reviewed including Bond (2014), Gross (2012), Mitchell (2014) are based on quantitative approach. To have an in-depth understanding of the issues of queer youths who are multiple marginalized, there is need to study in qualitative approach.

METHODOLOGY:

In the present study qualitative method is applied. As the present study aims to explore the role of social media in education, awareness and exploration of queer identity, hence case study method is adopted to gather in depth understanding and information on the same. Focused group discussion was applied as data collection tool. Case study helps to examine current real life conditions drawing out comprehensive contextual analysis of a particular events or phenomenon. In this study, 8 cases have been considered as samples through purposive sampling technique. The purposive sampling method is adopted as the study focuses specifically upon the queer individuals of Assam. The people who have participated in this study are broadly identified as gender and sexual minorities i.e. the LGBTQ community. The samples were generated by posting adverts in Xomonnoy, a queer supportive group active in Guwahati, Assam. The samples were purposively selected on the criteria of queer (LGBTQ+) identity, admission into higher education institution in Assam, experience of using social media and 16-30 age group. To collect data, focused group discussion is organized bringing the samples together in a moderated setting. To analyze the data, the cases are coded alphabetically as A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H. 'A' is a law faculty by profession and identifies as a Queer. 'B' is a Gandhi Fellow who identifies as a Queer. 'C' identifies as Lesbian who grew up in the capital city Guwahati, and an undergraduate student. 'D' identifies as a Gay who migrated to the city for higher education leaving his parents in his native village. 'E' identifies as Queer, and serves as community librarian in rural area of middle Assam. 'F', a research scholar and organizer of Guwahati Pride Walk identifies as Queer. 'G' and 'H' are the members of the Guwahati based Queer Community welfare organization Xomonnoy. The session starts with the question 'what have been your experiences in social media as a queer?'. Informed consent had been taken from all the participants. The responses and opinions of the participants are then

thematically categorized and analyzed.

RESULTS:

The focused group discussion opened up the experiences of the participants in regard to identity visibility. All the participants agreed that the prescribed undergraduate curriculums in the colleges and Universities in Assam does not space for queer issues. Case 'B' stated, 'We had to study the characteristics and problems of each developmental stages of human life in Developmental Psychology paper. While studying the adolescence period, we are prescribed to study the problems dividing them into two categories as Boys and Girls; but not the developmental issues of queers.' To this, 'A' added, 'When we were in college, we even did not know the terms and terminologies well. It is only after getting connected to different persons through Facebook, we got acquainted to the terms related to queerness.'

'C' pointed out the possible circumstances of being openly queer in social media. 'C', grown up in Guwahati, stated 'one remains safe if your accounts are private.' 'You can't be always openly gay in Facebook in place like here. You will post something gay, and tomorrow your neighbours will arrive at your home to report to your parents.'

'D' who had migrated to Guwahati for higher education from a remote village, had quite Facebook two years back. The reason was that he felt very depressive having seen the homophobic contents and comments. To this, 'E', a community librarian from a rural area opined that variety of opinions will always be there. To quote, 'I would not be able to accept me without social media'. 'A' opined that to protect own identity they had refrained themselves from showing up in social media. 'F', a researcher and organizer of Pride Walk in Guwahati mentions the emotional turmoil caused by social media. Due to the rapid changes in the social media contents, individuals get confused. Here, case B mentions a recent viral same-sex marriage in India facing severe criticism along with directions on parenting. This led to conflict of B with parents. Hence, it was agreed that family clashes are happening through social media.

Case 'A', a law faculty by profession, stressed the creation of inclusive media news room. Being an organizer of Guwahati Pride Walk, 'A' stated that during the Guwahati Pride March 2022, 'no byte to media' was the motto; because, the Assamese media allegedly broadcasts the queer lives in a very regressive and negative way. Though the press release included this point, no media house focused upon this in broadcasting the Pride Walk's news. Agreeing to that, 'B', opined that responsible reporting is very crucial.

To this, 'A' remarked that, 'conventional media like newspapers, channels and portals has not been a helping hand in the long fight of the community, specifically in Guwahati or Assam'. Case E shared own experience of organizing Pride Walk in the initial years in Guwahati mentioning that they were more concerned of their safety when they were out around 2014 or 2015. To this, 'A' added that

many people opines for curating social media, but it also makes the community individual separate and the homophobic peoples remains same without any change or sensitization in their thoughts or behaviours.

The discussion turned towards the role of social media to unrealistic idolization of queer individuals. Usually, the queer couples popular in social media trends, are idolized. But at the same time, it may have negative influence upon the very common life of the queer individual bringing unrealistic expectations. To this, 'E' responded that, 'we have to understand that they want to gain fame only, what they show is not the reality. It may hamper the process of individual empowerment of the queer people'.

Case F raised the issue that many queers indulges in cyber harassment, forces sexting to heterosexual people with fake accounts. It impacts the whole queer community very negatively. Case 'H' opposed that 'when a male harasses a woman, we don't target the whole male community; likewise we should not target the whole queer community in such cases'. Case E remarked that at least social media can be used to make both the homosexual and heterosexual people aware of such issues.

DISCUSSION:

As the discussion revealed the personal experiences of the participants, it became clear that the queer individuals have both positive and negative experiences of using social media, specifically when it is related to their identity existence. This is very similar to what Fox and Ralston (2016) found out in their study. Their study revealed that exposure to constructive queer representations is associated with resilience and well-being.

Recent academic works suggest that understanding how the digital technologies influences identity is being regarded as significant in sociology (Baker & Walsh, 2018; Lupton, 2014; Mercea et al., 2018). It reflects the prominence of virtual spaces created by social media in daily lives and in the process of constructing and communicating identities. Researches also indicates the increasingly significant role of digital platforms in personal and intimate lives (Adams-Santos, 2020; Das & Farber, 2020). Moreover, social media spaces are used by queer youths mostly for positive personal development and exploration, networking (Manago & Vaughn, 2015), sexual culture (De Ridder, 2017; Wignall, 2022), and as a source of information and support (Craig et al., 2021; Jenzen, 2017). This can be agreed to what the respondents opined in regard to their exposure to the community through social media in Assam. In spite of the positive role of social media platforms, queer youths face challenges in navigating their way round virtual spaces, experiencing cyber harms (Bezrah et al., 2012; Keighley, 2022). Thus the discrimination existing in the physical world gets reproduced in virtual spaces, echoing the prejudices and stigma linked to the 'non-normative' gender identities (Colosi & Lister, 2019; Todd, 2020).

From this discussion, based on the reflexive thematic approach, the participants' narratives may

be drawn out as follows —

General Pattern of Social Media Use: Social media spaces such as Facebook, Instagram, and Tweeter are significant for the LGBTQ community individuals. Though they have to face negative experiences, still they consider social media as a platform of expression and representation. For the queer youths in Assam, social media instead of the higher education institutions, functions as gateway of information, knowledge and understanding of the varied gender identities and its connotations.

Identity Formation: For LGBTQ people of Assam, social media becomes a platform of identity formation. It is the one medium to which they resort often for coming out.

Identity Barriers: It must be noted that social media also creates barriers for identity expression in case of the queer youths in Assam. The participants also admitted that factors that hinder their self-expression exist in social media. Antagonistic comments of users, limited bio-descriptor in profile settings are such identified factors. This is very similar to what Colosi et al. (2023) found in their study.

Conduct Regulation: In social media queer identities are many times subjected to moral policing. The viewers control content on social media platforms by stigmatizing and ostracizing the individuals (Brickell, 2012; Colosi & Lister, 2019; Duguay, 2016). The participants of the study had acknowledged that often the fears of being shamed, as well as the undeviating experiences of being discriminated have been crucial to their conduct.

CONCLUSION:

Individuals belonging to the gender and sexual minority communities utilize the social media platforms for different purposes. The fact that different social media platforms facilitate identity confirmation and coming out is undeniable. These virtual spaces are gradually becoming consequential in shaping how the gender minority individuals present themselves to others. Notably, the social media avenues provide an important space which helps the queer individuals to develop identity, and self-awareness. In spite of this constructive role of the social media handles, barriers exist impinging on the identity related affairs of the queers. Anticipated user hostility can be identified as a key barrier. The stigmatization of the minority individuals in terms of gender is also prevalent in the realm of social media which leads to feelings of shame amongst the queer individuals.

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