

Chapter 23

Exploring Operation of Gender in the Virtual Space

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ABSTRACT

We find ourselves inhabiting a world that has been brought closer together by the vast reach and influence of the world wide web. The interconnectedness provided by the internet offers access to information, connectivity, anonymity, and power, unlike any other medium. It is therefore crucial to recognize that the apparent anonymity of the internet conceals a multitude of secrets and layers of information, making it a more public medium than one might initially perceive. Engaging in the exploration and use (exploitation) of this virtual realm exposes us to numerous perils and dangers. The idealistic notion that the virtual realm would transcend physical markers such as age, gender, class, caste, and race, and not be defining factors of individual existence, remains uncertain. This chapter aims to examine how the internet simultaneously acts as a liberating and entrapping force, becoming a new arena for reinforcing existing gender inequalities.

INTRODUCTION

The cyber world has been hailed as a realm which would dissolve markers of corporeal existence like age, gender, class, caste, race etc. The argument being that as these markers which polarize are indiscernible in the virtual world they will lose their salience and we would have a utopian space where an individual can float free of all these restricting markers. However, the reality is far from removed. In *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (1997), Sadie Plant implies that dual roles still prevail in the new seamless boundless cyberspace: zeroes and ones are at the core of new digital technologies where she sees '1' as the man and '0' as the woman, the '0-ther' or nothing.

There is no denying the fact that the internet seems to be leaving an indelible mark on the warp and weft of our social interactions and systems by subverting prevalent norms and rules. The flux we are witnessing in the digital space can be harnessed into a productive space that can be used to mark a departure from traditional norms that define social power; however, the current reality seems to be far

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removed. According to Nielsen's India Internet Report 2023, India had over 700 million active internet users aged 2 years and above as of December 2022. Of these, rural India accounted for 425 million users, which was almost 44% higher than the number of active internet users in urban areas, with 295 million users. Female active internet users as per the report grew by 27%, whereas male users increased by around 18%. Nearly 90% of internet users were daily users. There were over 450 million smartphone users in the country, with video watching and video calling being the top two online activities. Facebook users in India have crossed the 240-million mark, becoming the largest audience country for the social media giant. YouTube, Instagram and WhatsApp are the other platforms frequented by users in India. On an average people spend 6-8 hours on the Internet in a day and most log on to one of their favorite platforms every two to three minutes in a day.

It is obvious by the above facts that the virtual space is slowly emerging as an extension of reality. In fact the boundaries between what can be perceived as real and what now constitutes the virtual is constantly blurring. What with artificial intelligence and intruding algorithms percolating into our daily life and existence. Smart devices have now become extensions of the human selves and almost every citizen who owns a smartphone is not a netizen. Women are increasingly participating in social networking and other related activities on social media where they are constantly interacting with other netizens who carry the markers of their gender identity to the virtual space. Oftentimes carrying prejudices and misogyny too. This is evident in the multifarious instances of cyberbullying, slut shaming and other related discrimination women and people identifying to other marginalized groups face on social media. An attempt thus needs to be made to understand how gender roles and misogynist practices percolate to the social media platforms and whether users of social media are aware of the choices they are making and the dangers that lurk in social media.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Researchers who have explored the operation of gender on social media suggest presentation and representation of self on social media as "identity performance" (boyd and Ellison, 2007; Buckingham, 2008; Liu, 2007; Westlake, 2008; Cover, 2012). The process of identity construction and management of gender on social media can be explored by deliberation on the ideas of sociologists like Erving Goffman, who have spoken about the 'performance of self in everyday life'. Social media profiles, posts, stories and statuses, especially the selfies can be looked at as conscious and reflective performances and representations of the self for designated audiences. These representations are constructed to give specific impressions about the self and surge narratives about one's life, identity and choices (boyd, 2008). This is similar to how one presents oneself to one's audience through speech, dressing and so on. In the online sphere often these representations or expressions of the self elicit name-calling or insults which can be referred to as *networked harassment*, in which an individual is harassed by a group of people connected by social media; and more nebulous interpersonal situations in which at least one participant strategically labels an incident or set of incidents as "harassment" although it may not meet evaluative criteria as such (Marwick, 2021). Online harassment is more common for women and nonbinary people, particularly women of color, queer women, and women in the public eye (Barton & Storm, 2014; Krook, 2017; Lenhart et al., 2016). These studies also reveal that harassment is often used to police women's online behavior and may have a debilitating effect on women's participation in the public sphere both online and offline. As a result, scholars deploy terms like "online hate," "e-bile," "gender trolling," and

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