



Making the invisible visible: the instrumental
role social media in the recognition and
affirmation of identity and rights of transgender
persons in Tamil Nadu

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I.Introduction

Some years ago, I participated in a drama festival in Chennai. I was touched by a drama enacted on the plight of transgender persons. The theme of the whole drama was centred around the transgender persons' battle for identity and existence. The protagonist in the drama, a transgender herself, with tearful eyes raised the question, "who I am? Why should I live on this earth with untold suffering, discrimination and humiliation for no faults of ours to be born like this?" This drama was an eye opener for me. My perception and attitude towards transgender community was completely changed. Whenever I encountered a transgender person, either I escape from them or tend to fool them with naive comments. Because that was the picture that popular media created in me about the transgender persons. Tamil film industry has done a great harm to the transgender community by depicting them as fringe elements in the society in the past. They could be fooled, despised, mocked at and used for sexual pleasure. Mass media have not recognized the inborn talents, skills and the capacities of transgender persons. And it has not addressed the real problems of transgender persons.

Even in our ordinary conversation, when we discuss on the question of gender in general, we unconsciously give importance to male and female and allow the transgender persons to slip from our minds and discussion. Adding fuel to the fire, we ridicule them in the public places, discriminate them in school, college, place of worship, bus-stands, railway stations, hospitals etc. They face double discrimination both by their own family members when are young and by the public when they grow up as adults with the clear orientation to be a transgender person. In all these circumstances they are forced to underdo many non-violent forms of discrimination, ill-treatment when they try express themselves as transgender persons and assert their identity in the public domain. Therefore, they feel safe, free and secured in the company of transgender persons who extend an emotional support, encouragement and guidance.

In the recent past (five to ten years) social media have become a connecting platform for the transgender persons to contact each other, share news, information, ideas, events, celebrations, achievements, choice of trainings, job opportunities, sufferings and painful stories. Social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Tick Tok help them greatly to stay connected and feel close to each other. They create different groups in Whatsapp or in

Facebook and share a whole lot of information with another. One special advantage in these social media is that they are user-friendly, accessible, dynamic, flexible and Transgender persons are able to get immediate response and gratification.

How do we understand the nature and function social media? Danah M. Boyd (2007) defined social network sites as web based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public and semi-public profile in a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of others with whom they share a connection, (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site. J.P. Ahluwalia (2012) emphasized that social media essentially gathered the like-minded people on a single platform. Social media involve online communities of people who share interests and activities with a group of friends; they are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others. Promod K. Nayar (2012) defined social network sites as “web services where people could host a profile, chat and communicate in a virtual version of public space”. He quoted them as the newest form of social interaction.

What is our understanding of transgender persons? We always try to imitate and enact what mass media have named transgender persons derogatively as “ali”, “chakka”, “number nine”, “prostitute”, “flirt”, “beggar” etc. All these names are demeaning and undermining the capacity of transgender persons. But real definition of transgender is entirely different. According to Stryker’s (2009) understanding of transgender persons, they are defined as “people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender.” In other words, the term “transgender” refers to a person whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with their birth assigned sex.

II. Review of literature

Survey of literature reveals mostly that how transgender person make use of social media platform to express about themselves and assert their identity along with their rights to live a decent, dignified life. Transgender persons announce their personal transitions in the social media pages. Deciding to announce about the personal transitions has both social advantages and disadvantages. Advantages such as social support and psychological well-being and disadvantages such as possibilities of rejection and discrimination (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010) are all part of the games. Maintaining social relationships during the transition period is very tough and it creates many tensions, as people explore new identity presentations

through social media by experimenting with appearance and behaviour while negotiating interactions and relationships with and self-expression to others (Haimson, Bowser, et al., 2015).

When they express their struggles and problems with their own fellow women, they lessen their psychological burdens and get emotional satisfaction of being together, and walking together towards a better future. When transgender persons disclose about stressful life events on WhatsApp and Facebook, they immediately receive a lot of social support from the fellow transgender community. As a result, they could easily lessen the stressful life event's negative mental ill-health and psychological disorientation. (Zhang, 2017).

Research studies have established the fact that online social media and support groups have really benefited a wide range of transitional communities, such as new parents (Evans, Donelle, & Hume-Loveland, 2012), those who have recently lost a job (M. Burke & Kraut, 2013), adults transitioning to old age (Norval, Arnott, Hine, & Hanson, 2011), and students entering college and acquiring jobs which are relevant to their studies. This becomes an inspiration to other transgender persons who are left alone without proper guidance about their future.

Transgender persons learn new socialisation skills through the use of social media which are otherwise not available in the offline context. This helps them to take a right direction based on their unique personal skills or talents (George, 1993). Social media is often seen as a private or safe space to present one's identity without necessarily having to be "out" in other contexts, because it can provide a way to maintain boundaries between social groups for those navigating gender transition (Cannon et al., 2017).

Although social media help the transgender persons in the announcement of life transitions and other issues, it could also become potential platform for harmful effects during life transitions. The transparent, open and public nature of social media sites could leave the transgender persons to the extent of facing great risks of sexual abuse, verbal harassment, humiliations etc. which can further complicate and even impede life transitions online (Dimond, Fiesler, & Bruckman, 2011; Massimi, Dimond, & Le Dantec, 2012). At times, people share about their identity without knowing the context, and as a consequence, they face many problems in the online context. Sharing of information in the personal social media page could become an additional stress during life transitions when their own close friends come forward to give offer unwanted and unnecessary advice, and any passive consumption of news

content without proper analysis can easily bring down the type social support which is very much required (M. Burke & Kraut, 2013).

Social media may offer opportunities for transgender persons to access supportive networks and avail resources because have an active and significant online presence. Evidence suggests that popular social media like WhatsApp and Facebook provide opportunities for making connection, imparting education, establishing relationship, lobbying for transgender rights and sharing of resources that were previously unavailable (Van Dijck, 2013). In a similar vein, these social media create an avenue of self-expression where cyber bullying and verbal assaults are common (Schwickrath,2012). A significant amount of prior research examined experiences of transgender persons within a larger society.

III. Research Question

How do transgender persons make use of social media platforms for the affirmation of their identity and rights through their online activities?

IV. Objectives of the study

1. To find out how transgender persons make use of different social media for their daily interaction with other online users.
2. To investigate how social media provide them with space for self-expression which otherwise is denied to them in the offline situation
3. To find out how social media tools help them to affirm their identity by way of expressing their unique talents and achievements.
4. To make an enquiry into how social media become a platform for self-development and carrier opportunities.

V. Theoretical Framework

Erving Goffman (1959) who was the first one to introduce the concept of impression management stated that individuals desired for social acceptance. They usually seek this social acceptance by presenting themselves in best light possible. They are often engaged in activities in order to convey an impression to others. People are interested in controlling the impressions they are about to convey to others, so they could be consciously or unconsciously cautious about their actions and behaviours. In our day-to-day interaction, the body serves as a critical site of identity performance. In conveying who we are to other people, we constantly use our bodies to project information about ourselves. This is usually done through our way of dressing,

gestures, postures, attractive speech and facial expressions. In this process, we try to put forward our best effort at what we want to say about who we are. Sometimes we may fail in this effort. While we intend to convey one impression, our performance is not always interpreted as we might expect. Through continuous learning to make sense of others' responses to our behaviour, we can assess and examine how well we have conveyed what we have actually intended. We can then change or modify our performance accordingly. This process of performance, interpretation and adjustment is defined as impression management. This theory is applied to the present study because the transgender persons are trying to present them in the best light possible making an impression. This intends to bring in turn positive and affirmative comments from others.

Joseph Walther (1996) introduced hyperpersonal model of computer mediated communication. It means that it is more than the face-to-face interaction or direct communication in a physical setting with the presence of non-verbal symbols. He talked about four important factors that are operative in hyperpersonal communication that goes beyond what is happening in the normal inter-personal communication. Those were: *sender, receiver, characteristics of channel and feedback*. First, *senders* make a very careful selective self-presentation in CMC settings. For example, when they chat or post comments in social media they take the advantage of their great control over message construction. They craft messages to reflect preferred characteristics of their personality.

Second, the *receivers* in online communication engage in stereotypically positive and idealized attributions of their online partners. In other words, in any online interaction the receivers may over generalize or give idealized version of the identity of someone. Third, the *characteristics of channel* in online interaction facilitate goal-enhancing messages by allowing the senders to have a greater control over message construction which is not available in face-to-face interaction. Fourth, *feedback* might create self-fulfilling prophecies among senders and receivers. As senders make a selective self-presentation in online communication, the idealizing receivers in turn, send selective and positive messages. This keeps the online communication going between the senders and receiver without a hurdle.

VI. Methodology

Qualitative content analysis using online ethnography model is employed in this study. It involves the researcher to minutely attending to the details of transgender persons' movements

in social media. The online ethnographer is immersed in an online environment with the transgender persons. He closely watches, observes the subjects to be studied and he keeps a diary noting down their behaviors, thoughts, ideas, opinions and other kinds of activity they do in social media. He also observes all their postings both in visual and textual form. He also keenly looked into original messages and forward messages. The problems and challenges the transgender persons face when they use social media are also carefully noted.

VII. Tool for data collection

As part of the study, the researcher selected 40 transgender persons who are regularly using Whatsapp and Facebook. They also became friends with the researcher in these social media. With their prior consent, he observed their whatsapp groups and Facebook pages daily two times a day -the morning and in the evening. It lasted for one month. He closely observed five variables in Facebook namely, profile information, profile name, timeline activity, Likes and Comments and status updates. Among other social media, WhatsApp and Facebook was chosen for online ethnographic study because these two were widely used by transgender persons. All the postings done in Whatsapp and Facebook were taken note of. They were later classified and analysed.

During the observation period, the investigator had an online chat with transgender persons or phone conversation. This was done mainly to clarify certain issues on their online activities and the real motivation behind those activities. The investigator also had group discussion with the group of 12 persons mainly getting to know their usage patten, motivations and intentions for using social media and what ultimately, they achieved online interaction with others. He also had an in-depth interview with 10 transgender person who leaders-cum-activists working in different districts of Tamil Nadu. They were asked to share about their own experiences of using social media and their perception about other young transgender persons using social media.

VIII. Analysis and Discussion

Ddigitalisation has offered the ethnographers with the opportunities to easily collect, store the content of electronic databases, logs of interaction namely, characters, words, utterances, messages, exchanges, threads and other archives (Herring 2004). The current study is focused on the content and internal elements of social media such as WhatsApp and Facebook which play an instrumental role in recognition and affirmation

of identity and rights of transgender persons who are constantly using it. Generally, identity is defined as the self-concept of who someone is through the interaction with others.

1.Affirmation of Identity

Transgender persons have experienced discrimination, humiliation and isolation at all levels in the offline world. So, they like to form various groups in the online forums where they feel free, safe and stand united in one identity as transgender persons. And the names for the social media groups are expressive of inner longings and symbolic of voice of protest. For example, transgender persons are active in some of the specific groups such as “Trans employment”, “Born2win” “Trans Resource center”, “Transgender life achievements” “Tamil Nadu LGBTIQ” in both WhatsApp and Facebook.

What do they share in these groups? and what benefits do they get? are the important questions in this section of analysis and discussion. First, they send birth day greetings to individual transgender person celebrating birthdays. As they are not accepted by their own family members and the society outside the family, they rely on the fellow transgender community for birthday wishes. One transgender person initiates and all others in the group immediately responds by sending birthday wishes. They always send both textual messages and prepared e-poster for birthday wishes. These birthday wishes really boost their self-image and becomes an emotional support and recognition from transgender community.

Second, they share whole a lot of information about educational opportunities, training programmes, job opportunities, events, celebrations and achievements with the group members. Since transgender community is very much scattered and live in different parts of Tami Nadu, they could not meet in one place to share news and information. It is very expensive to travel from one place to another place for the purpose of seeking and sharing news and information. Social media is a blessing and an online gift, so to say, for them for an easy connect and effortless transfer of news and information. For example, in *Born2win* Facebook group the admin Sweta Sudhakar, shares abouts the admission to school, college, tailoring programmes, running small

hotel on the pavement etc. This information is not only a news but inspires other transgender persons who are involved in begging and sex trade to come away from the dehumanizing act. They also get an idea to qualify themselves in the areas in which they are interested in and start some self-employment schemes and get some jobs based their qualification.

Third, they upload postings about the unique and inborn talents, skills capacities such as singing, dancing, drawing, driving, putting make up, photography, script writing oration, master of ceremony, leadership skills etc. In these postings, they not only share about the unique talents and skills, they share about the success stories of receiving certificates, awards etc. This becomes an impetus for other transgenders who are not well-motivated to prove their talents. For example, Priya Babu who is running a transgender resource center at Madurai is multi-talented personality. When she recalls her young age, she remembers the past with bitterness and resentment. She had to flee away from her native place at a time when she decided to express her wish to become a transgender person. But she decided to rewrite her history with her gift of sharp intelligence, oratory skills, film direction etc. She has widely read about the history of transgender persons. She could give intelligent talks on the transgender reality and answer any question on the problems and issues of transgender community. She has produced a number of documentary films on the cause of transgender community. She said, “we have developed a good resource- books, articles, films, documentary films, short films- for the students to make research on transgender community and enlighten the society”. She is very active in posting all the transgender-related news and information in the WhatsApp group called “Trans Resource Center”.

Jeeva, a transgender person from Sivakasi had a passion to become a film actor right from her young age. She came to Chennai and faced a lot of difficulties in the beginning to enter into cine industry. But with the continuous efforts and her perseverance she is able to take a lead role now with Tamil films stars like Rajini Kanth, Vijay and Vijay Sethupathi etc. Her inspiring and motivating interview was shared in the Whatsapp group. Many were sending congratulatory notes for her interview which really affirms her identity as transgender-turned film actress.

Fourth, they share about the awards, prizes, certificates for their outstanding contributions both in the academic institutions and non-academic organizations. These awards assert their identity as talented persons and disproves the mindset of the society that transgender persons are lazy and incapable people. For example, Rakshika Raj, become first Indian transwoman who completed B.Sc nursing received degree certificate from the Governor of Tamil Nadu. This became a big news in the mainstream media and gave a big motivation to all the young transwomen to come up life with proper educational qualification. Sneka, a transwoman from Trichy was appointed as government driver in the collectorate. When she drove her brother's car on her own, she was not accepted as a driver. She wanted to prove herself as trained driver. Now she got government job as a driver. When she gave an interview to the media, she said that she wanted to do some good things to her own community. She also appealed to the society not to undermine the capacity of transgender persons and urged them to give equal opportunities to transwomen. She also said that it was an honour for her when she is invited as a chief quest for flag-hoisting in the school.

Similarly, Miss. Sudha, an activist who works for the cause of transgender community was given *Kalaimaamani* award, a highest award of Tamil Nadu government for her outstanding contribution for the welfare of transgender groups. Miss. Sheethal, a leader of transgender community in Pondicherry was awarded a honorary doctorate for her remarkable contribution to the welfare of the transwomen community. Miss. Nalina, a P.G student in visual communication was elected to student's union in Loyola college, Chennai. All these postings in social media not only give the transgender community due social recognition and but also affirm their identity as transgender persons with different capacities. It also sends positive vibrations to the entire society to the extent of changing their negative perceptions of the transgender persons.

2.Assertions of their rights

As transgender persons are fighting a big battle for their identity, they have to equally fight for their rights as human beings to live a decent and dignified life. They constructively use social media platform for propagating awareness of their rights

among transgender community and the need of demanding rights from the society and government. As they are rejected by the family and the society, they are unable to meet the basic needs. They need a safe and secured place for their stay. They need money to have decent food and purchase decent dress to wear. They are forced either to wander in the streets with begging bowls or get indulged in sex trade. These are only two means or options with which they could earn money for their survival.

Right to get education is a fundamental right. But because they are different from male and female, they are not accepted in schools or colleges. With lots of mental and physical struggles, if they join educational institutions, there is no proper treatment by teachers and students. They ridicule their tone of voice, dress, behavior etc. And they are not sure about which toilet they have to use- male or female. Keeping all these reasons, the transgender persons are not able to complete their studies. In social media pages, a handful of transgender persons who have completed their studies withstanding all the trials, share their success stories and thereby assert their rights to come up in life. For example, miss. Anbu Rubi from Tutucorin district has shared in her the Facebook page about how she came away from all the humiliating experiences and did nursing studies and she is happy to be appointed as a nurse in a private hospital. She said that if private and government educational institutions give opportunities for the transgender persons to study well, they completely rewrite their life stories.

When a boy or girl feel the orientation to become transman or transwoman at the age of 14 or 15, they must be allowed freely to choose any gender he or she likes to take. This is his or her right. This is a biological problem. We need to understand their desire and wish to become a transwoman. When this right to choose the gender is denied, then his or her right is violated. For example, a girl in Madurai who wanted to become a transman, filed petition in the collector office with the help of Bhrathi Kannama, a senior legal activist for the cause of transgender community. She demanded the assistance of the district administration to change his gender and give protection to the girl.

As the transgender person are aware of their rights, they raise their voice against any atrocity, violence, injustice done to any transgender in any part of Tamil Nadu or

India. For example, Rakshika Raj who successfully completed her B.Sc nursing course was not allowed to register her name in the nursing council. Knowing this is an injustice, she fought a battle to register her name and succeeded in her battle. Another good example who fought against the injustice was Preethisha. She was asked to go for begging with the forced conviction that the 98% of trans persons are involved with in begging and sex trade. She raised a strong question “where is it written that a transgender must only beg”? She opted to work in a food delivery company and refused to go for begging. This information was shared in Facebook and Whatsapp and received good appreciation for her boldness and determination to be self-dependent.

Many transgender persons opposed the recent Central Government’s Transgender Rights and Protection Bill with one voice. This voice of protest clearly reveals that Transgender are aware of their genuine rights. They staged a strong protest and sent written condemnation through post cards to the President of India. The reason for the opposition was that the bill apparently denies many rights to transgender persons. It curtails the freedom to choose their gender at their free will. It has not articulated any reservation for the transgender both in education and government jobs. When they are rejected by the family, the government should send them to rehabilitation centers. Transgender persons are not ready to accept this arrangement, because what kind rehabilitation center is not made clear in the bill. This ambiguous and unclear bill must be redrafted and sent for wider discussion among transgender community. They demand that have to accept all the provisions made in the bill, then it could be passed in the parliament.

Priya Babu, when she spoke on the rights of transgender demanded that there should be an MLA seat in the assembly to represent our community and our issues. We need to gain political power so that we could establish the rights of transgender persons. The government should clearly articulate the reservation for transgender persons and give equal opportunities in both private and government jobs. She constantly air these views in social media to give awareness on the rights of her community. She also said that mass media should deconstruct the despicable images it created in the past and try

to present them in good taste. Only then the negative perception about the transgender community will be removed from the common people.

IX. Major Findings

1. Rejected and humiliated by the family and the society, transgender persons use social media to come closer as one community supporting each other.
2. By sharing news and information about their positive and negative experiences they assert their identity as transgender persons.
3. By registering their inborn talents, achievements and their struggles, they become aware their rights and demand the rights.
4. Sharing of Positive information about transgender community in social media removes the prejudices and bias that the common people carry in their minds.
5. By posting all the information and photos, videos they also get into problems of sexual abuse and verbal harassment from the general public.

X. Conclusion and Recommendations

This research paper has explored how transgender community make use of social media in their daily interaction. Facing continuous rejection, marginalisation and humiliation, they are not left with other options than resorting to social media for a closer connection and feel the supportive mechanism among them. Definitely, social media such as Whatsapp provide a safe platform for the transgender persons to share all that happen to them in their struggle to live a dignified life. In the process of uploading whole lot positive information, social media really helped the transgender community to inspire and come away from the humiliation and to become self-reliant. The special talents and the unique achievements have sent a positive signal to the society which has brought some concrete changes in the perception of the common people. They have begun to respect transgender persons and understand their problems and issues.

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