The Gender Role Stereotypes on the Homosexual Group under the Influence of Social Media

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Abstract: As the homosexual community becomes more and more engaged and participates in social media, online violence and harassment targeting the identity of the gay community become more frequent. In order to explore the causes of the stigma behind this phenomenon, this paper starts with the gender stereotype of the homosexual community and explores the roles played by the mainstream community and the gay community in the interaction of social media from the perspectives of the active side of spreading prejudice and the passive side of accepting stigma. The relevance of labelling theory to spreading prejudice and accepting stigma is also emphatically discussed by referring to the theories of previous scholars. In addition, this paper discusses how the gay community as a stigmatized community is affected by social media, which shows that social media can be a double-edged sword for gay and lesbian communities. On the one hand, online groups help increase collective self-study, but at the same time, they also face the risk of mental illness. Finally, suggestions on both population groups for de-stigmatization are discussed to provide ideas for substantive changes to improve the well-being of the gay community.

Keywords: social media, homosexuals, stigma

1.   Introduction

The concept of gender, different from sex, is that no matter how biological genes and chromosomes shape how people look physically, the effect of general experiences of socialization through history and prevalent cultural norms determines how people view and identify themselves. Besides, gender role refers to the behaviors which are socially "appropriate" to their gender. For example, males are expected to have masculinity, including the characteristics of being strong, logical, and tough, while females are expected to be elegant and soft. The value judgments of these features gradually turn into a system of discipline and punishment to standardize and structure people's thoughts and behaviors in a vested value system to maintain the social order, as existing stereotypes, especially in functionalism idea.

Social media can be broadly defined as the communication platform where individuals can maintain a connection with friends and make new friends without geographical restrictions. Popular examples such as TikTok, are closing the gap between people. Recently, they have been widely used among the young generation, including sexual minorities. By 2023, TikTok had surpassed 1.53 billion users [1]. Among them, LGBTQ+ youth tend to spend significantly more time online than non-LGBTQ people [2]. It means that the sexual minority group is also the major audience of social media,

which is an informal learning environment for their identity development. Generally, adolescents' self- cognitions, especially gender identity and sexual orientation, are potentially aided and shaped by messages and information that they get access to on such sites [3]. Besides, it also means a place where people with diverse characteristics integrate, representing a big assemble of diversity that step outside the relatively limited social habitus of each individual's reality.

Currently, homosexuals transgress the conventional gender role more diversely, also not excluding those homosexual individuals who are more traditional. For instance, within the culture of their community, popular terms of portrayals become increasingly common, which show their violation of the vested norms in traditional ways. Some lesbians are labelled as "tomboys", which refers to lesbians who dress or behave in a masculine manner while calling some gays "bottom" to represent their feminized personalities of delicate and weak, or even imply the passive and obedient position during an erotic relation. Therefore, when sexual minorities go against the traditional expectation, they are often seen as gender deviants by others [4]. Under exposure to gender role discipline, breaking socially desirable gender norms can be punished by sanctions [4]. According to the research, TikTok is spreading anti-LGBTQ+ content through its recommendation algorithm in the context of online interaction [5]. Also, statistics show that 43% of LGBTQ+ users have experienced online harassment in the past 12 months, compared to 22% of non-LGBTQ+ users [6]. Therefore, a gay or lesbians are more likely to be attacked online, which approves the seriousness of their insecurity and harm to their interests.

Thus, the final significance of this study is to promote the sustainable development of the online status of the homosexual group in the recent day, by exploring the deep relationship between gender stereotypes and stigma reception in the big context of interaction on social media. It also gives insights to relative authorities or NGOs to design ways to reduce the stigma through some of the suggestions.

Much previous research in this topic area has focused on social media or gender stereotypes alone but lacks an integrated perspective that looks at both together. In order to examine the impact of social media on the dissemination of the gender stereotypes mentioned above, this paper will mainly discuss how gender stereotypes further evolve into stigmatization of the homosexual community and their subsequent effects from the perspective of the subject and the object in the information dissemination mechanism. Firstly, the paper delineates the roles of the mainstream and homosexual's communities in the overall online interaction towards the dissemination and acceptance of gender stereotypes into the "subject" and "object" respectively. Secondly, based on the different roles, it analyses the ways in which the subject of communication disseminates gender stereotypes and the subsequent effects on stigmatization, and how the object of receiving gender stereotypes internalizes the receipt of stigma through self-labelling and the subsequent effects on minority stress levels and mental health. After clarifying the broad framework and implications of the overall stress and stigma transmission process in social media, relevant de-stigmatization recommendations will be given based on the above.

2. The Dissemination of Gender Stereotypes in Social Media

2.1. Stereotypes

The background of patriarchal culture and heterosexual culture still play a dominant role in determining individual gender identity and depicting duality in the traditional sexual discipline, while the social gender of "either male or female" embodied in individual consciousness is also a concrete expression of the social structure. In contemporary society, the mainstream group is highly dependent on the existence of social media in both information exchange and cultural communication, in which the so-called gender temperament and gender image are also transmitted based on the order constructed in the traditional cultural context of gender. Also, those temperaments and images will

reinforce the traditional concept again, which gradually results in a stereotype in the process of communication.

2.2. The Labelling Phenomenon in Social Media

2.2.1. Labelling Phenomenon

The phenomenon of labelling originates from cognitive stereotypes and simplified attributions of unproven events [7]. As mentioned above, an individual's cognitive system is closely related to the cultural background behind it. In online interaction, people's thinking mode is also influenced by the original value system, which is reflected in the fact that people are more accustomed to and tend to be guided by the logical thinking and cognitive system shaped by their cultural background. They naturally integrate and classify specific groups or events by pasting a high generality label, to obtain preliminary information about new things quickly [8].

2.2.2. Reason of Labelling

The anonymity of Internet communication encourages labelling others arbitrarily. Compared with traditional media, the anonymity of network communication is one of its main characteristics, enabling all people to get rid of the shackles of various identities in reality and speak freely on the network. This anonymity magnifies the negative emotions of the group spread through the network, making irrational remarks or hostile attacks more frequent. In addition, the network supervision system is not perfect enough, so it is difficult to pursue the responsibility of anonymous users, resulting in a lower cost of random speech, which intensifies the phenomenon of tagging.

2.2.3. Processes of Labelling

The deviant label changes people's perception and role definition of a particular individual [9]. The phenomenon of tagging is revealed in the fact that the mainstream groups in social media examine and evaluate the diverse reality from a single perspective of bias [10]. Therefore, the so-called "tagging" is the gaze and generalization of minority groups under the mainstream ideological system. Within traditional gender education, people are always guided by the differences between men and women, whether in the norms of behavior or the choices of personal preferences. This further reinforces the sense of boundary between the behavior of men and women and solidifies the concept of gender. For example, traditional men are often taught to be "rough" and "unfussy", so when they meet more "feminine", made-up gay men on the Internet, derogatory labels such as "sissy" are attached to them. It is not difficult to see that mainstream groups are used to putting individuals into their familiar social gender system and evaluating and classifying groups different from themselves from their perspective.

2.2.4. The Impact of Labelling

When a label that refers to a particular characteristic is possessed, it strengthens the label's previous association with that characteristic. In fact, the name of any label is neutral, but certain people use the name in a certain context, it can give a different meaning. For example, when traditional men use the "sissy" label to highlight how the gay community behaves differently from themselves. Cognitive compartments that distinguish one from another and devalue differences to convey negative impressions of physical or sexual characteristics contribute to discrimination and stigma, which reinforces the stereotypes [11].

3.   Reception and Conversion of Gender Stereotypes among Homosexual Groups

3.1.   The Transformation from Stereotypes to Stigma

There are different meanings of essence between stereotypes and stigma. The former refers to a general social attitude. Hence, gender stereotypes of homosexuals are widespread ideas and disciplines on behaviors according to social gender that is used to standardize homosexual people, but the stigma is at a more serious level. Stigma is an attribute of devalued stereotypes [12].

From the perspective of the homosexual community, part of the reason why the labelling effect works in their group is also attributed to the so-called unequal position between the subject and the object, which is reflected in the unequal rights between the "deviant" identity and the dominant "heterosexual" identity [11]. Since the development of the homosexual community in ancient times, it has been a marginalized minority group in all aspects of society, such as religion, culture, economy, politics, and its comprehensive rights and public discourse rights are far less than that of the heterosexual group, leading to low social attention and acceptance. In this power difference, the labels mentioned above can be transformed from the universal social attitude to the exclusionary language of the powerful to the powerless and the subsequent potential discriminatory consequences. On the contrary, if the initiator is a relatively disadvantaged gay group and starts the label with the same nature, the gender label of heterosexuals will hardly constitute substantial harm. This is because it is difficult for the weak party to use limited social, economic, and political resources to contend with the power difference, and most of the time the content of labels is supported by mainstream culture. As a result, the stigma in the power gap will cause more harm to the vulnerable minority than the mainstream group

3.2.   Impacts on Mental Health and Well-being

3.2.1. Improving Well-being

Compared to the reality they have to tackle, social media is beneficial to homosexual groups to some extent. Social media controls anonymity by allowing homosexual youth to situate in relative safety because users can block or accept whomever they choose. Anonymous social media campaigns ensure that participants' emerging homosexual identities are protected from premature disclosure and victimized by important social figures, like friends and family who may not accept them [13]. Additionally, online community participation can improve their happiness. Participating in online communities may expose LGBTQ+ youth to role models who share their experiences and seek emotional and social support, which contributes to increasing identity confidence and resilience after trauma.

3.2.2. Minority Stress Level

The Minority Stress Model depicted the process of stress formation and its impact on mental health outcomes by illustrating the causal relationship between minority identity, and exposure level in the general environment [14]. To substitute into the context, the environment of social media and the violation of gender in homosexual group roles are logically connected with the stress level. The platforms of social media as the general circumstances represent homosexuals having to face diverse types of users, including heterosexuals and other socially dominant groups, with the potential risk of being cyberbullied or online harassed due to their sexual identity and the gender role that played. Existing research has focused disproportionately on the negative effects of social media engagement, identifying social media's potential to increase anxiety, depression, stress, lower self-esteem, and other aspects of young people's mental health [15]. Those adverse impacts on psychological health

and mental well-being are likely led by the expectation of rejection, concealment, and internalized homophobia after the discrimination events [14].

4.   Suggestions on De-stigmatization

The significance of de-stigmatization is to improve the voice and mental health of homosexual people in online social networking from the perspective of substantive results. To reduce the negative impact of stigma on aspects of the homosexual community to a greater extent, it is better to start from the features of social media platforms and think about how to take advantage of them to publicize the concept of de-stigmatization for the gay community and the mainstream public.

4.1. Mainstream Group

For mainstream groups, discrimination should be addressed from its inherency. Although this is difficult to implement in the short term, it should also be a goal for long-term efforts. Through the personalized content algorithm of social media, more positive reports about the gay community should be recommended to more audiences to shape a good image in front of the public, such as science popularization, and the equal rights movement which aims to weaken the boundary of sexual orientation and gender identity. In addition, those anti-homophobic communities that engage in hate speech need to be cracked down, by improving the reporting mechanism which helps to isolate negative voices from the public so as not to affect more people.

4.2. Stigmatized Group

For the stigmatized community, de-stigmatization is more important to minimize the harm that stigma can do to the gay community. Social media platforms can lead in creating online forums and dating platforms related to gay people, by telling each other their own stories and attracting like-minded people online to enhance mutual cohesion and community belonging. Considering the interactivity and openness of social media, it can help spread the subculture of the gay community, including gay-themed movies, literature, and novels, which not only enhances the exposure and social attention of the group but also enhances the self-confidence of the group and helps overcome more difficulties of their identity.

5.   Conclusion

In the context of social media, this paper focuses on gender stereotypes and stigma against the gay community and analyzes how gender stereotypes spread from the subject of communication, namely the mainstream group, to the object, namely the gay community, and gradually evolve into stigma, as well as its subsequent impact and some suggestions for reducing stigma. From the perspective of the subject of spreading bias, this paper connects the bias spreading, labelling theory, and stigma, and proves the rights-based system behind the label with the theory. According to the different rights between groups, neutral labels are given unique meanings to stigmatize vulnerable groups. In the process of transmission, labelling, and stigmatization it is also demonstrated that bias will be repeatedly reinforced. Secondly, from the perspective of the object of stigmatization, it analyzes how the object internalizes prejudice into stigmatization and the positive and negative effects of social media on the mental health and happiness of the gay group. Finally, from the point of view of the subject and object of communication, the paper discusses the appropriate ideas to reduce the influence of stigma on different groups.

The limitation of this paper is that it only briefly mentions how social media can help destigmatize. There is a lack of deeper discussion of de-stigmatization by discussing how it weakens gender

boundaries and undermines to some extent the gender stereotypes commonly imposed on sexual minorities, which does not extend to the further stage. It plays a positive role in enhancing identity confidence and well-being, but it does not make a following analysis of the solution efficiency and practical cost. At present, the research is only in the theoretical stage of "finding the problem". To make real progress in the network and social status of sexual minorities, further design and implementation of more comprehensive programs are needed to make actual changes. Secondly, this paper presupposes that the mainstream group is the subject of stigmatization, and the stigmatized gay group is the object of communication. As the gay community becomes more and more involved on the Internet, they also gradually transform into the subject of communication to contend with stigma. However, this paper avoids the analysis of this issue to analyze how prejudice spreads stigma mainly. Besides, this paper only chooses the perspectives of stereotypes of gender stereotypes, instead, more bias toward the homosexual group is ignored.

In the future, research can be done by focusing on the above-neglected problems. There is a deep discussion on subsequent stigmatization policies, such as thinking about the needs, root causes and solutions of the problem, and considering the bias and stigma in addition to gender stereotypes.

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