



Digital Storytelling and Queer Conversations: Social Media and Online Publishing as Sites of Negotiating Heteronormative Discourse in India*

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Abstract:

The recent exponential growth of digital media in India through the use of smartphones and the accessibility of online social networking sites has changed the way that gender and sexuality are perceived. This paper examines how digital storytelling on the queer subject matter across various online platforms participates in the ongoing heteronormative discourse in India. Drawing on select case studies available on the internet, the study finds that the narratives do not simply represent queer identities but actively intervene in dominant frameworks by reshaping how cisgender audiences perceive and engage with gendered difference. The analysis is guided by the work of Sara Ahmed and Zizi Papacharissi, whose concepts enable a reading of digital spaces as environments where emotions and discourse intersect. Through this framework, the paper demonstrates that queer digital storytelling operates at diverse levels, generating shifts in perception, producing new forms of recognition and unsettling the stability of heteronormative assumptions. By foregrounding the interaction between narrative production and audience reception, the study positions digital media not merely as a platform of visibility but as an active site where dominant understandings of gender are continuously reconfigured.

Keywords:

Digital Storytelling, Heteronormativity, Queer Discourse, Social Media in India, Gender Narratives

Introduction:

The explosion of digital media over the past decade has considerably transformed the socio-cultural conditions in which the expression and perception of gender and sexuality take place in India. The availability of internet, together with increasing popularity of smartphones and social networks has facilitated the distribution of stories previously told in marginal and private spheres. In this environment, the role of online platforms as sites of narrating gender and sexuality becomes significant. This transformation acquired particular urgency in the aftermath of a supreme court judgement in 2018, which decriminalized same sex relations and brought questions of queer identity into renewed public visibility. While this decision provided for a new legal reality in terms of recognizing queer identity, it did not necessarily mean the elimination of deeply rooted heteronormative attitude. On the contrary, such a decision increased the intensity with which the questions of queer identity started being discussed and challenged. In such an evolving context, online publishing platforms become the essential places where narratives concerning gender and sexuality are written in the form of reflective texts.

These platforms offer the opportunity not only to increase the visibility of marginalized subjects but also to start conversations that contest the prevalent ways of perceiving the world.

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For example, the introductory section above the selected entries published on the website Gaylaxy titled "Being Gay in India: Final Entries" says: "Being gay is never the same for any two persons, and the experiences and reactions vary from place to place, people to people, and culture to culture" (Being Gay in India). Such statements reject the homogenizing effect of heteronormativity that tends to perceive non normative genders as something identical and unchanging. In fact, the emotions in the statement integrate a universal sense of validation from people living in a particular society or culture. Another example of online reporting published on Queerbeat demonstrates how queer narratives connect with social institutions. In particular, the article "Queer Literature for Children is Changing Minds in India" illustrates how the introduction of queer literature into children's education facilitates changes in the social perception of such identities. In this regard, besides providing representations of minority genders, such texts are part of a larger pedagogical project of introducing alternative views of gender in children's minds. Moreover, other Queerbeat articles like "Love and Loss in Multai" describe the experiences of people in small towns, indicating that despite the social pressure exerted upon the LGBTQ+ population, such people exist, and few of them want to be noticed and listened to.

While there is an extensive body of literature devoted to queer theory and digital media studies, much of the previous research still concentrates on representation or visibility as central concepts. In particular, studies focusing on digital queer expressions tend to address the opportunities such technologies offer in terms of identity formation and community-building, whereas studies addressing heteronormativity in media discourse tend to analyze such stories in terms of bias and stereotypical representations. One area that remains relatively unexamined is how queer narrative production interacts with heteronormative reception, especially in the context of contemporary Indian society.

The current research aims to fill this gap by examining digital storytelling in terms of negotiation rather than representation. This paper will focus on case studies published online on websites namely Queerbeat and Gaylaxy, demonstrating how digital storytelling in contemporary India represents a complex process through which heteronormative discourse is frequently reconstituted.

Comprehending Digital Queer Discourse in India:

Work related to digital media and queer identity in India has centered on the assumption that digital technology fosters visibility. Blogs, web-magazines, and social networking websites have been investigated as spaces where the lives of queer people are told beyond traditional representations. Digital platforms such as Gaylaxy are presented as venues for posting first person stories and opinions which reflect lived realities. Likewise, projects on Queerbeat are often viewed in terms of creating a collection of documents which tell the story of queerness and bring to light the silenced voices in history. Therefore, online storytelling is regarded as a strategy for reclaiming erased realities and making queer people visible.

This emphasis on visibility has been productive but also limiting. Much of the scholarship assumes that once queer lives become visible, heteronormative assumptions begin to weaken. As a result, the outcome remains fixed on the production of chronicles rather than on their reception. The question of how these narratives are interpreted by wider audiences is left insufficiently explored. Documents from digital platforms can serve as an indicator that visibility does not undermine heteronormative assumptions as a concept. Texts from these websites are always addressed to a reader who is expected to understand the narratives produced by queer people as something else other than heterosexuality. It is evident from the analysis that storytelling through digital media involves more than just making a statement. Stories are created with the

anticipation of their reception by others. Therefore, they circulate as documents that challenge heteronormative assumptions by provoking a response and asking questions. Visibility as a category cannot explain this phenomenon. What is essential for digital queer storytelling is engagement and interaction with narratives. This engagement transforms digital narratives into collaborative acts of meaning-making rather than isolated expressions of identity. Unlike conventional print narratives that often establish a relatively fixed relationship between author and reader, digital platforms facilitate an ongoing dialogue in which readers actively participate in the production of knowledge. Such participation demonstrates that queer storytelling online is never completed at the moment of publication, it remains open to revision and reinterpretation as different audiences encounter these narratives from diverse social and cultural locations. Every interaction contributes another layer of meaning, revealing that queer identity itself is continuously negotiated through relationships rather than merely represented as a stable category. This dynamic process challenges the assumption that identity can be understood through visibility alone, since visibility without participation risks reducing queer lives to objects of observation instead of recognizing them as active producers of knowledge.

The digital environment also alters the temporal dimensions of storytelling. Queer narratives remain accessible anytime to everyone from everywhere after their initial publication, allowing readers from across the globe, readers from different timelines to revisit, reinterpret, and reconnect with experiences that may have originally emerged within entirely different historical contexts. The persistence of these narratives creates a living archive where memories, emotions, and personal testimonies synchronize without being confined to a single historical moment. Unlike institutional archives that have frequently excluded or marginalized queer experiences, digital archives emerge through dispersed acts of documentation undertaken by individuals and communities themselves. These archives preserve stories that might otherwise disappear from public memory, ensuring that everyday experiences receive recognition alongside major political events and organized movements.

The significance of such archives lies not only in their ability to preserve information but also in their capacity to generate new conversations about the past and its relationship to the present. Readers encountering these narratives often compare historical experiences with contemporary realities, recognizing both continuities and transformations in the lived experiences of queer communities. This comparative engagement encourages critical reflection on the persistence of discrimination while simultaneously highlighting the evolving forms of resistance developed through changing technological landscapes. Consequently, digital storytelling functions as an educational practice that enables individuals to understand their own experiences within broader historical and political frameworks.

Another important dimension of digital queer storytelling concerns the redistribution of narrative authority. Traditional media institutions have historically exercised considerable control over which queer stories become visible, how they are represented, and whose voices are considered legitimate. Editorial policies, commercial interests, cultural censorship, and dominant ideological assumptions have frequently limited the diversity of queer representation within mainstream media. Digital platforms significantly alter this relationship by lowering many of the barriers that previously restricted participation in public discourse. Individuals no longer require institutional approval to narrate their experiences, enabling a wider range of voices to participate in the production of cultural knowledge.

This democratization of storytelling does not imply that digital spaces are free from inequalities or power relations. Access to technology, internet connectivity, language proficiency, economic resources, algorithmic visibility, and platform governance continue to shape whose



narratives receive attention and whose stories remain marginalized. Nevertheless, digital environments provide opportunities for voices that have traditionally been excluded from dominant cultural narratives to articulate experiences on their own terms. The emergence of independent blogs, online magazines, discussion forums, community archives, and social networking platforms illustrates how marginalized individuals actively construct alternative spaces for representation rather than waiting for recognition from established institutions. The emotional dimensions of these narratives are equally significant. Queer storytelling frequently communicates experiences that cannot be fully understood through factual description alone. Feelings of isolation, fear, desire, shame, joy, intimacy, and hope constitute essential aspects of queer existence that often resist conventional forms of representation. Digital storytelling enables these experiences to circulate among readers who may recognize similar emotions within their own lives.

Furthermore, digital narratives frequently disrupt the expectation that queer lives should conform to linear developmental models. Conventional narratives often portray identity formation as a progression toward self-discovery followed by acceptance and integration into society. Queer digital storytelling repeatedly complicates this framework by presenting identity as fluid, uncertain, and continuously discussed across different social contexts. Individuals may describe multiple processes of coming out, experiences of changing identities, discussions between public and private selves, or shifting understandings of gender and sexuality throughout different stages of life. Such narratives resist simplistic models of personal development and instead emphasize the complexity of lived experience.

The interactive character of these platforms further demonstrates that storytelling is inseparable from community recognition. Narratives often receive validation through likes, comments, reshares, collaborative discussions, and collective consent of pushing the desired content through the social media algorithm. Recognition from anonymous crowd contributes to the construction of identity by affirming experiences that dominant social institutions have historically denied or ignored. This recognition does not eliminate the challenges associated with queer existence, but it creates forms of solidarity capable of mitigating isolation and fostering resilience. Throughout the online interaction, the community becomes an active participant in the ongoing production of meaning, reinforcing the idea that digital storytelling is fundamentally relational rather than an individual aspect. The existing body of work leaves this interaction underdeveloped. While it establishes the importance of digital platforms for queer expression, it does not sufficiently examine how these expressions intervene in the everyday frameworks through which gender is understood. The movement from representation to negotiation marks a shift in emphasis from what is shown to how it is taken up or reinterpreted within a broader social field.

Affective Circulations and Digital Orientation: A Theoretical Framework:

It becomes easier to see the change when one takes the timeline in consideration. Social media content provides even clearer evidence of this transformation. Instagram feeds of creators like Patruni Sastry regularly post videos that tell stories about the lives of queer parents and their everyday lives. Similarly, videos posted on youtube and instagram by Anwesh Sahoo tell the stories of his life and the responses he receives when people ask him stereotypical questions. Instead of reflecting on their experience through written reflections, creators in this stage produce video content, which encourages interaction and engagement from the outset. Unlike earlier blogs where written articles were only accessible to a certain group of online readers, the modern day mains stream social media posts rely on algorithmic circulation. One way to think about this transformation is through the use of the concept of orientation proposed by Sara

Ahmed in her book *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. As she writes, "If orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as 'who' or 'what' we inhabit spaces with" (1). By consistently occupying the same spaces and aligning ourselves with particular people and ideas, we get used to seeing the world as aligned with certain norms, which we consider as natural. Within the online environment, such orientation happens because of constant repetition, through feeds, timelines, recommendations, and other means. Whenever queer narratives emerge in such spaces and repeat themselves, they cause reorientation. And every time a reorientation happens, we perceive reality differently.

However, while reorientation explains how perceptions are modified, we need another term to describe what happens after that. That is why the concept of affective publics articulated by Zizi Papacharissi in *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* is helpful. According to Papacharissi, "affective publics are networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment" (125). It means that digital platforms organize discourse not just through logic and rationality but through feelings, moods, stories, hashtags, images, and everyday expressions of sentiment. Digital storytelling of the contemporary kind creates this intensity of feeling and invites participation. For example, comment threads on Instagram posts about queer families show both sympathy and some amount of curiosity, and videos explaining stereotypes often prompt strong feelings of either agreement or disagreement.

Thus, the suggested framework allows for a comparative analysis of the two phases of queer discourse transformation in India through digital media. The first phase, represented by blogging, can be examined with regard to its capacity to reorient through reflection and complex storytelling. Subsequently, the second phase, marked by digital storytelling, can be analyzed in connection with the generation of intensity and affective public negotiation. This transformation constitutes a progression in which digital storytelling evolves from articulation into engagement. This framework does not assume that queer narratives always redirect people into accepting queer community. People may or may not strengthen their biases through encountering queer stories and there is a possibility that they form new opinions on the kind of content that is being consumed by them through social media. However, what matters is the processes of reorientation through an established path and mode of expressing sentiments.

Negotiating Heteronormativity Through Digital Storytelling: A Close Reading:

The changes that have occurred within Indian queer discourse through digital media became much more pronounced in the recent times. While at the beginning of the last decade, online queer stories were forming themselves on such mediums as blogs and independent publishing sites, a piece like "Mom... I want to Tell You Something" published on Gaylaxy demonstrates one of the key aspects of queer discourse at this point in time. Specifically, the story is introspective and based on the need for a personal explanation to the reader. The narrative presents a personal account of the narrator as he comes out to his mother. However, the way in which he approaches the matter highlights the complex nature of queer identity and its relationship with normative discourses. As explained by the author Amol More, "It's neither your fault Aai, nor mine, that I am gay. But I don't have the courage to tell you the truth. Because I fear you will not understand." (More). Indeed, queer experience needs to be understood within the context of heteronormative discourse to some degree as well, since this is the only medium that exists to communicate ideas about queer identity to the reader. Here, identity is formed through anticipation and persuasion of a particular reaction rather than as an independent concept.

New digital content, however, appears to move away from explaining queer identity towards more assertive modes of expression. Stories posted online in Queerbeat provide new insights into queer identity by situating it within other social systems of power, including caste. In particular, articles like "What It Is Like to Be Queer in a Casteist Society" present the complexity of queer identity through the lens of marginalization based on caste identity. The intersectionality involved in queer experience means that one's identity is recognized with reference to various structures of power, including classist and casteist oppression of queer identity and marginalized communities. As the author Aadhi reflects, "As a dark-skinned person from a historically oppressed community, my feelings of insecurity with my body and my mental health struggles aren't just inherent. They are rather a consequence of the classist, casteist society I grew up in." (Aadhi). The fact that such expressions of queer identity take place in such an environment shows that queer discourse is not always simply about gender performativity, it must be actively inhabited in a certain society. Since caste is an important structure for organizing social and sexual relationships, the non-conforming genders tend to establish certain directions to regulate them. The relationship between being queer and having a socially discarded identity cannot be looked at on its own. It has to be seen in connection with the systems that manage society. Sexuality and gender identity are felt inside the systems of caste, religion and region. These systems shape how queer lives are seen or not seen. Because of this the idea of one queer group often hides big differences inside and even though queer politics has fought against the ideas about being straight it has not always stayed away from other power structures. These structures still decide who gets resources, who is shown and who feels like they belong. People from groups that are not in power like certain dalit castes or other marginalized communities often face exclusion that is very different from what more privileged queer people face. Their exclusion is not just added on. It comes from how different power systems work together. This makes identity and life experiences shape each other.

The idea of intersectionality helps explain this because it shows that being treated badly usually comes from than one source. Caste bias, money issues and the idea that being straight is best often work together. This makes experiences that cannot be explained by looking at sexuality. In places that claim to be queer being in a better position still decides who is heard, who is seen as the example and who is left out. Getting education, knowing a language, being part of a city group or having money often decides if someone can take part in queer activities or build a community. This puts people from groups that have been left out at a disadvantage. Because of this many still feel alone in places that say they are inclusive. This shows that being included is not about accepting different sexualities. It also shows that being unfair can happen in ways through everyday actions what people think is proper what is seen as beautiful what is seen as educated or what is seen as valuable. These things keep up the power structures that are in the big society. These experiences affect how people think about themselves how they feel and how they can take part in group life. Carrying identities often makes people not speak about one part of themselves to be accepted in another place. This creates a struggle between being seen and being safe. This is especially important in places where caste and race still control how people move in society, how they talk to each other and what chances they get. Because of this, being queer cannot be separated from the society. An intersectional view makes queer studies go beyond gender and sexuality. It includes the current situations that shape different queer lives. This way studies become better and challenge the idea that being free can come just from identity politics. It says that real change needs to look at all the unfair systems that still control the lives of people who are not in power. The experiences of people who are not in power because of caste make scholars rethink the words that are used for being part of a group. It shows that real support only comes when queer talk sees differences of thinking everyone is the same.

Therefore, any narrative emerging within such an environment actively participates in building its heteronormative beliefs. And what the narratives achieve as a result is not the substitution of heteronormative discourse but its consistent confrontation within what Ian Palmer and Richard Dunford call “discursive tension” in their article “Managing Discursive Tension: The Co-Existence of Individualist and Collaborative Discourses in Flight Centre”. In this article, Palmer and Dunford explore how conflicting narratives persist in the organizational environment without subordinating one to the other (1045-1069). Although developed in the context of organizational change, the concept can be translated productively to digital queer discourse, where heteronormative generalizations and queer narratives about all castes and communities collaborate in a shared society.

Performance and Affective Response:

The process of negotiation is also complicated by the use of digital storytelling in highly interactive spaces such as Instagram. As previously mentioned, posts by Patruni Sastry shows queer domestic scenes and parenthood that places non-conforming gendered subjects in everyday social settings. Visual depiction of regular actions creates a sense of normalization by putting the queer experience in a familiar context. And the content of Anwesh Sahoo involves addressing stereotypical questions with irony and humor. Such interactional posts challenge the underlying assumptions of heteronormative thinking. However, they do not stop at being posted online. The conversation expands to comments and shares where users provide feedback by agreeing, asking further questions, showing disgust or disapproval of the subject matter. This is where the concept of affective publics by Zizi Papacharissi comes into play. The meaning of the content does not lie solely within its primary message. It is constructed by people's reactions and emotional investment in the topic. In this case, a story that causes more online engagement will travel further, attracting audiences outside the original space and encouraging discussion.

In the described scenario, it is possible to see the formation of heteronormative thought process in action. Supportive comments indicate acceptance, whereas negative reactions highlight the continued prevalence of stereotypical ideology. Regardless of the type of reaction, both of them belong to the same context. The content does not solve the dilemma. It allows it to exist. Throughout all cases, the described transition is evident. Digital stories from early years relied on explaining and reflecting on issues related to heteronormative beliefs. Later approaches to digital storytelling were based on online trends, public engagement, and social media reach. However, the change was not linear. Elements of reflection remained along with continued resistance. What changed was the method of observation.

This shift also redefined the relationship between storytellers and audiences, placing greater emphasis on sustained interaction rather than one-way communication. Consequently, digital narratives increasingly became sites where meanings were assembled collectively, allowing queer experiences to be interpreted through participation and evolving forms of community engagement instead of singular acts of representation. Thus, digital storytelling can be viewed as a means of neither reproducing nor dismantling heteronormativity. The discourse was questioned and reconstructed multiple times through interactions. The shift from self-reflection to interactional discourse marked the evolution of queer narrative in the digital environment.

Conclusion:

The materials examined here reveal that digital storytelling in India does not function merely as the means of representation but rearranges the circumstances of the emergence of perception and questioning of gender. Through queer storytelling in the spaces of Gaylaxy and



Queerbeat, as well as the interactive environment of main stream social media, queer narratives undergo the transformation from narratives based on explanation to the narratives which are integrated into the ordinary experience of their consumers. This transition is vital for the ability of these narratives to move away from the framework of representation and become instruments of intervention in the dominant frames of understanding, altering the way cisgender people interpret gender difference. It is important for the process of communication within digital discourse since narratives do not just challenge the established frames. By integrating them into the process of reinterpretation, these narratives force cisgender people to reconsider their perception of gender and to recognize its contingent and diverse nature. Multiplicity disrupts expectations and makes it clear that identity is not stable and fixed. At the same time, queer lives narrated from inside the family challenge the assumption that there exists an ordinary and normative social structure.

It is crucial to recognize that this revolution is not always a successful outcome. There are instances of resistance to reorientation and rejection of narratives which fail to persuade their recipients despite the strong affective responses provoked by them. The increased visibility provided by digital platforms is accompanied by a greater potential for conflict and controversy. While this is the case, both heteronormative and queer ideologies coexist, interact and remain unresolved. Hence, heteronormativity must be challenged consistently, through interaction with narratives, and within certain perspectives. These findings also suggest the possibility of future research, which would involve the investigation of patterns of reception among different communities and regions of India, as well as more detailed attention to the peculiarities of circulation in specific regional and social contexts.

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