

***Reinforcement and Deconstruction: The Impact of Digital Media on
Gender Identity Understanding and Expression***

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Abstract

Digital media, the technology translating all information into numerical form regardless of its medium, has almost penetrated every aspect of the life of the masses. Immersing in a world saturated with digital technology, individuals seem to be constantly influenced by the digital products that they are exposed to. One aspect of this impact may be their self-cognition and self-expression of gender. As this influence is closely related to the self-awareness and development of humans, it is necessary to examine how this effect is achieved and its possible influences on the multitude. Given this background, this essay will combine academic theories on participation, remediation, and bricolage in digital culture, as well as gender presentation in various digital media forms such as movies, music, video games, and social platforms, to analyse how digital technology shapes individual recognition and expression of their gender identities. In terms of the outline of the structure, this essay will be divided into four parts. Firstly, how digital media may reinforce the gender stereotype will be examined with reference to specific examples of various digital media forms. Secondly, the potential of digital media for challenging the gender binary will be analysed with supporting cases in life. This will be followed by a reflection on how these two impacts of digital media on the individual understanding and expression of the gender issue may be achieved. Finally, a conclusion will be made, which argues that digital media may both reinforce and challenge gender stereotypes as it tends to imbue and reinforce hetero gender stereotypes (male as hegemonic, masculine and active; female as feminine, affectionate, nurturing, passive and sometimes objectified) in patriarchy, on the one hand, while also seems to provide an opportunity to deconstruct the traditional gender ideology on the other hand.

Keywords: Digital Media, Gender Identity, Gender Understanding and Expression

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The reinforcement of digital technology of gender stereotypes

One possible influence of digital media may be the reinforcement of traditional gender stereotypes among the multitude. According to Judith Butler, gender is a fluid identifier that is constantly shaped by the individual experiences and the symbolic representations presented to individuals (Biscop et al, 2019, p5). With constant exposure to digital technology, the gender notion presented in digital media may be internalized by the public, shaping their gender recognition and gendered behaviours. Firstly, this impact of reinforcement may happen in popular movies. According to a survey by Coyne et al (2016), the way different genders are portrayed in Disney films seems to affect the development of children's gender perceptions. To be more specific, the beautification of princesses characterised by passive, nurturing, and waiting to be rescued by men in Disney movies tends to lead to its girl viewers being less eager to work, paying more attention to appearance, and paying less effort when encountering challenges (Coyne et al, 2016, p3). This finding demonstrates the portrayal of characters conforming to traditional gender expectations in films may shape and reinforce viewers' gender stereotypes. In addition to Disney films whose audiences are mainly youngsters, the presentation of traditional gender roles could also be found in other movies. According to research about gender presentation funded by the Geena Davis Institute (2007, in Sutherland and Feltey, 2017, p12), there is a lack of female representation in both Hollywood movies and independent films. Furthermore, the depiction of females in these films seems to be stereotyped by the dominant gender ideology, as most female characters are either affectionate, submissive, and oppressed by the patriarchy, or possess great power but have extremely sexy bodies that cater to the male gaze (Sutherland and Feltey, 2017), which will probably reinforce the traditional gender perspectives of the audience. This kind of gender-stereotypical presentation could be seen in a host of films even those portraying female cyborg characters which should represent a blurred gender boundary (Haraway, 1990). For example, the extremely sexy Motoko Kusanagi in *the Ghost in the Shell* and the submissive blonde secretary Pepper Potts in *Iron Man*. Though both are cyborg characters that are supposed to show a more open-minded view of gender, the gender stereotypes in the patriarchal discourse system seem to continue in these films due to the submissive traits that they embody (obedient to men) and the objectification of women (to-be-looked-at-ness), leading to a possibly continuous reinforcement of traditional gender notions.

Apart from movies, the reinforcement of gender stereotypes also appears to exist in music. According to the research of Anne Ey (2016), sexualized music tends to contribute to the formation of gender-stereotypical views during the development of adolescents' self-cognition. Unfortunately, stereotypical gender representations seem to appear frequently in popular music and its music videos, amplifying listeners' gender stereotypes through repeated indoctrination and constant reinforcement of biased portrayals and a plethora of sexual innuendo in mainstream and non-mainstream pop music (Arnett, 2002; Baxter et al.1985; Sherman and Dominick1986; Wardetal, in Bogt et al, 2010, p3).

Thirdly, video games may also strengthen gender segmentation. According to Sarkeesian's convincing analysis (2014), the way gender is presented in video games is usually highly problematic, which may reinforce gender stereotypes. Specifically, according to her systematic analysis of gender representations in a host of popular video games, females are frequently coded as passive, erotic images to cater to the heterosexual male desires, functioning as decorations of these computer games (Sarkeesian, 2014). What is worse, the practice of objectifying females by regarding them as sexual objects, disposable goods and harming them seems to be being encouraged by popular video games, being achieved through

the design of reward mechanisms and the specific interactivity of video games (Sarkeesian, 2014). For instance, in *Grand Theft Auto*, female NPCs are designed as tools used for health regeneration and could be killed to retrieve the money spent on purchasing them (ibid.). Through this design, the game developers and players unite to achieve the objectification of women, imbuing a notion that women are tradable and disposable, and rationalizing the behaviour of objectifying and committing violence against women (Sarkeesian, 2014). Conceivably, long-term exposure to these video games will probably lead to the internalization of these toxic gender stereotypes. This internalization may be reflected in female self-objectification and male attempts to express masculinity through sexual violence. In addition to games predominantly targeting male audiences, gender stereotypes seem also exist in the games considered to be friendly to women and non-heteronormative players. For instance, in a Chinese game named *QQ dazzling dance* (Liu, 2019), although violence is hardly seen and symbolic intimate behaviour between same-sex avatars is allowed, gender expectations seem to be embedded in the user-game interactions. This could be seen in the design that in-game marriage is only permitted between different genders and the holding of a beauty pageant about female avatars in the online forum of the game (Liu, 2019, p8). This game still seems to reproduce and strengthen gender stereotypes existing in real life. This indicates that gender stereotypes may be replicated on social media and continuously constrict the cognition and behaviour of the public.

Finally, social platforms might also play a role in reinforcing gender segmentation. Firstly, this could be achieved through different gender expectations towards men and women reproduced on digital platforms. For instance, a drunk woman in a photograph posted on Facebook will likely be blamed while a man in a similar picture tends to be admired as attractive (Mallan, 2009, p6). This indicates that gender stereotypes may be replicated on social media and continues to limit the cognition and behaviour of the public through those traditional gender norms. Another example demonstrates reinforcing effect of digital platforms on gender stereotypes is the dating application, Tinder. Specifically, through the swipe logic embedded in this application, complex and multidimensional humans are distilled down to several superficial dimensions such as appearance, figure, race, and age (Srinivasan, 2018). Under this circumstance, users conforming to mainstream gender expectations such as white, beautiful, and sexually attractive are more likely to be favoured by other Tinder users while those with diverse characteristics are easy to be filtered at the beginning, losing the opportunities to be known even if they have other attractions such as pleasant personality. Conceivably, this type of social platform may reinforce gender stereotypes and harm the self-esteem of marginalized groups that are 'less favoured'. Secondly, digital platforms may also provide a hotbed contributing to the proliferation of toxic gender culture. Reddit, a website that is usually regarded as the home of a host of heterosexual geeks against feminists and people with non-binary identities (Massanari, 2017), is a good example to demonstrate this viewpoint. The strengthening of the gender binary on this platform is achieved through the combination of its algorithm recommendation mechanism, the number advantage of geek users, and the spiral of silence effect (Massanari, 2017). Specifically, the highly liked and voted content is usually placed at the top and reach more Redditors (Massanari, 2017, p9). Due to a large number of geeks and their preference for content involving objectification of women and anti-homosexual speech, the postings and comments involving this biased view are more likely to be spread on Reddit, cultivating a geeky masculinity culture breeding the homo-phobia, anti-feminism as well as misogynist activism. Apart from Reddit which is mainly used by heterosexual men, social platforms or websites with more diverse users also appear to play a role in the spread of toxic gender notions. For example, Facebook groups and online forums are sometimes used to spread pornographic images and discuss the rapeability

of girls (Henry and Powell, 2015, p12). This may be because the anonymity of social platforms allows them to discuss sensitive topics without being identified and punished. Conceivably, this may promote female objectification, rape culture as well as a special kind of masculinity expressed through violence against women, imbuing and reinforcing a toxic gender recognition.

The challenge from digital technology to gender stereotypes

Apart from strengthening gender stereotypes, digital media seems also challenge the dominant gender ideology. Firstly, in the field of film, though most films conform to gender stereotypes, some movies do play an important role in changing traditional gender bias in their respective periods. This challenge and diminishment come from their presentation of revolutionary gender images on the screens. As systematically teased out by Sutherland and Feltey (2017), films genres including blaxploitation and action heroine, rape-revenge, and grrrl power all pose challenges to the traditional gender notion to some extent through the depiction of powerful and masculine female characters, weakening the gender stereotypes. These films present many progressive images of women, having positive implications for changing public stereotypes about gender at different times. In addition to these film branches, non-traditional gender representation also appears in current mainstream movies. For instance, Elsa in *Frozen* and Carol Danvers in *Captain Marvel* are independent and powerful women figures who are not constricted by male domination and the male gaze. The occurrence of this phenomenon challenges the traditional gender notion, matching the concept of remediation proposed by Deuze in his article about digital culture (2006, p68-70), indicating that media may refashion themselves to make up for their shortcomings to meet the needs of the contemporary world.

Secondly, social platforms may also play a role in challenging gender stereotypes. To be specific, digital technology connects individuals with similar experiences and provides them with a chance for in-group discussions as well as out-group advocacy, participating in their concerned issues directly. This is demonstrated by the #MeToo movement on Myspace and Twitter fighting against sexual abuse. Myspace and Twitter connect people with similar traumatic experiences and help them speak up for themselves and engage in gender issues by providing them with a space to campaign online. Conceivably, such campaigns will probably draw more attention to the sexual violence and victim-blame situation that usually happens to women and promote the improvement of this issue. This case shows that the connectivity and the interaction of digital platforms and the participatory character of digital culture (Deuze,2006) may be beneficial to break gender bias. Additionally, digital platforms may also challenge traditional gender concepts through the bricolage of digital users. For instance, Feminist Frequency clip scenes from games and reassemble them to serve their purpose. They release a series of streaming videos on Youtube analysing how gender stereotypes are strengthened in video games as well as speaking up for multiple marginalized groups such as Queer, contributing to the breaking of traditional gender notions. In addition to the public expression of gender identities, digital media might also provide a safe space for private discussions and practices contradicting traditional gender appropriateness by virtue of its anonymity. For instance, the homosexual software Grinder helps gay men to look for partners, creating a community for this marginalized group to express their gender identities that may be considered as a deviation from the norm and to engage with others belonging to the same group (David and Cambre, 2016, p3). In all of these cases, digital technology displays its potential to challenge traditional gender ideology and promote the expression of diverse identities.

Thirdly, video games may also contribute to the change of the traditional gender notion. For example, the role-playing video game *GayBlade* allows its players to experience homosexual identity. In this game, players need to defeat a range of homophobic people and rescue Empress Nelda to reach the game goal. Through playing this game, the public will probably have a better understanding of the homosexual community that is usually stigmatized and excluded due to its distinctive gender ethos, providing an opportunity for changing the public stereotypes about marginalized groups. In addition, this game may also offer a chance for individuals with marginalized identities to express their identities in digital space. As summarized by the game developer Ryan Best (1992), it provides a chance for minoritized groups to 'strike back at homophobia from behind our computer screen', contributing to the expression of multiple identities in terms of gender.

Discussion

Taking all of these analyses together, it could be seen that the impact of digital media on the cognition and expression of gender is complex and cannot be simplified by traditional dichotomous thinking. Digital media may both reinforce and challenge gender stereotypes that men should be active, heterosexual, and have hegemonic masculinity while women are supposed to be affectionate, nurturing, passive and feminine. Sometimes these gender stereotypes may also present their variants, which could be divided into three categories. The first type is the objectification of women catering to male sexual desires, which usually make females are given the properties of things such as being tradable, disposable, and becoming potential targets for violence. The second kind is the demonization of individuals with marginalized gender identities such as homosexuals, creating an ideology of heterosexual male supremacy. The third one is a toxic gender notion that the masculinity of men may need to be expressed through heterosexuality and violence against women rather than safeguarding social justice through acts of bravery. In terms of how digital technology may reinforce and challenge these gender stereotypes and their corresponding variants, digital media appears to reinforce the traditional gender notion by constantly reproducing them in various kinds of digital products and imbuing these notions in the public while challenging these perspectives through the remediation of mass communication and opportunities it provides for groups with alternative identities to unite and express their voices. During this process, the three features of digital culture including remediation, participation and bricolage proposed by Deuze play important roles in the reinforcement and challenge of gender stereotypes (2006). Specifically, as analysed in the previous paragraphs, the relatively older forms of media appear to refashion themselves to adapt to new opportunities that arise (the challenge of gender stereotypes posed by the representation of non-traditional gender roles in films). In addition, it seems that ample opportunities for participation in the gender issue provided by digital technology play an important role in both the reinforcement and challenge of gender stereotypes, which is embodied in the chances provided for individuals to engage in meaning-making in the gender-related field in the video games and on the social platforms. Finally, bricolage also plays a role in shaping self-cognition and self-expression in the aspect of gender, which is reflected in the phenomenon that feminist self-media assembly, disassembly and reassembly of the existing game videos to break gender stereotypes and undermine the toxic gender perception. With all these factors in play, digital technology may be both a stereotype solidifier and an opportunity to spread unbiased notions of gender identity to the masses, creating a more inclusive and diverse world. As Judy Wajcman pinpointed (2010, in Henry and Powell, 2015, p5), it is 'neither inherently patriarchal nor unambiguously liberating.'

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has examined how digital media may shape the cognition and expression of identity from a gender perspective. It argues that technology may both reinforce and challenge gender stereotypes through participation, remediation, and bricolage. Admittedly, there are still many limitations. For example, the scope of this essay did not allow the discussion about the possible strategies that could be adopted by different stakeholders to mitigate gender stereotypes, and how to protect children from being exposed to overly sexualized content and help them develop a healthy self-recognition of identity freeing from gender stereotypes. Both of these areas are worthy of further investigation and could be natural extensions. Maybe these could be directions of future research to discuss in response to the influence of digital media on our culture and society, contributing to the development of the world towards a more unbiased and ideal community.

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