SURVEYING THE REPRESENTATION OF IDENTITY EXTREMITIES IN POP CULTURE MEDIA

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Abstract

Identity is the perception that society has of individuals, groups or communities. These identities are formed around markers such as race, gender, caste, sexuality and are intersecting, that is overlapping. The way identities are perceived, to a great extent, determine the quality of life that people associating with that identity lead. Historically, some identities that have been oppressed, have also been stigmatized in mainstream narratives. Such perception is not only changed and moulded by the action of the state and the rule of law, but also by their portrayals in popular culture and the lens through which they are viewed and treated by corporates and social movements alike. Thus, there is an inherent burden that lies upon all those who influence discourse in the public arena to break down negative stereotypes to act against the social discrimination that identities face as a consequence of such narratives. This includes structural changes in how capitalist business structures work to make them more receptive of diverse identities, cognizance of privilege amongst individuals who are a part of social movements and reinforced portrayals of true narratives in popular culture.

Keywords: Pop Culture Media**,** Social Movements, Social stigma, Corporates

INTRODUCTION

Stigma is defined as a mark of disgrace associated with a person, quality or circumstance. Stigma stems from multiple sources but when based on identity has adverse impacts on the mental health and functioning of those who are stigmatized. This stigmatization of identities is based on how society perceives that identity historically and how narratives have been shaped around that identity. In a globalized world, there exists a wide scope of re-framing these narratives and beliefs because of the exposure to external discourse which is usually alien to the historic stigmatization of marginalized identities. This paper to analyse the impact of stigma based on identity on the mental health and growth opportunities of those who are stigmatized. It points out methods of improving narratives around identities to reduce stigma by creating narratives

using pop culture. Tools of marketing and advertising go a long way in framing such narratives as well. They aid in the process of normalization and reduce discrimination against those who associate themselves to such identities. This paper has analysed the efficacy and impact of such marketing methods. It points out the changes that are needed in social groups and business organizations that would help create safe spaces for the oppressed and stigmatized. The best way to deal with the fine line between corporations representing ideologies of marginalized communities like the LGBT community and reappropriating their cause for the purpose of increasing revenue and capturing markets by creating a positive perception of the brand in the eyes of consumers is when corporations make structural changes to include the oppressed, changes that we must strive for as a community.

BACKGROUND

In sociology and social psychology, an outgroup is defined as a social group with which an individual does not identify with. Human beings tend to define themselves and their identities according to their race, caste, religion and gender. Those who are not a part of such identity are considered to be an 'out-group' from the perspective of an individual. In almost all social setups members of an 'out-group' form a minority and in many cases, a minority that has faced historical discrimination and oppression. Examples of this range from African Americans or Dalits in educational spaces of the United States and India respectively. In the present day, pop-culture also defines social groups, and as a result of that, it puts individuals in 'out-groups'. Such groupings can be formed on the basis of common interests, physical and mental characteristics. This is why individuals who are obese also find themselves to be included in the fold of 'out-groups'. Such social groupings have multiple implications. Members of the 'in-group' are treated more favorable than those who belong to the 'out-groups'(Aronson, Wilson, Akert, Sommers, 2015). It also causes outgroup derogation, a phenomenon in which an 'out-group' is perceived as a threat to members of an ingroup (Hewston, Mark, Hazel, 2002). Most importantly, however, it causes the 'out-group' homogeneity effect, which creates a perception of members of the 'out-group' being perceived as being more similar to each other than members of the 'in-group'(Jackson, 2011). This is especially likely to occur in regard to negative characteristics. These factors cause high levels of stigmatization of members who belong to 'out-groups' which has detrimental impacts on their mental health and their potential to grow. Gayle Rubin, the American anthropologist and feminist activist, authored an essay in 1984 titled 'Thinking Sex' (Rubin, 1984). It talks about how there is a hierarchy created within sexual engagements where some are considered acceptable whereas others aren't. She also talks about the negative perception of sex in the absence of marriage or love in the western society. This idea of 'sex negativity' contributes to the oppression of any minority that deviates from the heteronormative, traditional idea of sex, especially the LGBT community. People fail to understand that just

because they do not like to do something does not make it repulsive and unacceptable. She points out that communities need to adopt be accomodating of different sexual cultures, instead of perceiving them as inferior (Rubin, 1984).

There is a drastic impact on the self esteem of stigmatized individuals forming the 'out-groups' in social settings. It has been observed that young students who tend to outperform their peers hide their academic skills because of the fear of social exclusion. This also hampers their self confidence which acts as a barrier in them fulfilling their potential as they grow up (Coleman, 1985). It induces a sense of shame, hopelessness and isolation in individuals from a very young age. Fear of social interactions and self doubts leads to them having fewer opportunities to grow in life. This also reduces the ability of the stigmatized to seek physical and mental healthcare. Research has shown that obese individuals have a lesser propensity to seek healthcare. There is also a correlation between social ostracization and mental conditions such as depression, anxiety and substance abuse (Phul, King, 2013).

NORMALIZATION THROUGH REPETITIVE REPRESENTATION

Normalization is the process through which ideas and behaviors that usually fall outside of social norms come to be regarded as 'normal' and 'acceptable'. Repetitive Representation is the process of continuously representing a belief or identity in discourse in a way that it breaks down negative stereotypes attached to that belief or identity. Repetitive representation aims at breaking down pre-established bias and judgements that cause stigma towards individuals which ultimately leads to hindering of interactions and engagement with them. Repetitive representation involves breaking down the most ingrained stereotypes that majority communities have bought into by providing original narratives and tropes about the 'out-group' that the mainstream can relate to and accept. These representations are made in media that has wide outreach- such as movies, television programs, music and commercials. It is aided to a great extent by the growth of technology and the internet, which not only allows individuals to access narratives that might help break their stereotypes but also provides a space for engagement and realization.

One of the most prominent examples of repetitive representation breaking down stereotypes is the perception of homosexuals in the western world. Stereotypes dictated that members of the LGBT community were incapable of raising families and had very similar yet 'queer' tastes and preferences. This was a perfect example of members of an 'in-group' (which was that of individuals following heteronormativity) developing stereotypes about members of an 'out-group' (the LGBT community). With the growing popularity of Television Shows such as Modern Family (a comedy that draws similarities and comparisons between households of gay

and straight parents), movies such as Moonlight and Brokeback Mountain (which show the struggle of members in the queer community), the perception of the LGBT community in the United States has grown more and more favourable, over the past decade (Smith, 2011). People, even those who are averse to progressive ideals and have deep rooted misconceptions about members of the 'out-group' tend to engage with pup culture. Repeated reinforcements, thus attempt to change such misconceptions by continuously attacking them, through logic, emotion and satire. There is a history of stigma surrounding mental health in the black community, and it contributes especially amongst men. This has lead to self-medication and ignorance of destructive symptoms. In 2015, 2,504 African Americans died by committing suicide in the United States out of which 80.79 percent were male (American Association of Suicidology, 2017). In recent years, hip-hop has started to serve as a catalyst for awareness and discourse within the black community. Rappers are using social media and lyrics to address their vulnerabilities with the community. Veterans of the music industry including Shawn Carter (Jay-Z) and Dwayne Michael Carter Jr (Lil Wayne) have reflected on their struggles with mental illness and substance abuse in their music which is a sign of vulnerability, something which is antithetical to the perception of African American men in society created and perpetuated by a combination toxic masculinity and racism. Such repeated representations in pop-culture and media often spill out into the realm of politics and public policy. It creates a greater need for the recognition of problems faced by the oppressed and subsequent action to solve them. There is lesser room for ignorance and bigotry. This is reflected in President Obama's shift of stance in support of gay marriage during his second presidential campaign (Bowers, 2012).

ROLE OF CORPORATES

Economic transactions between individuals and companies have a larger sociological implication as well. The way companies orient themselves over a period of time in the public view has a very direct impact on how the public perceives not just commodities but also the impact they have on their users. It creates a standard for desirability and acceptance in the society. For example, fairness creams have dominated the Indian market for cosmetics for decade. Advertisements of such brands (like Fair and Lovely by Hindustan Unilever) constantly demonise dark skin which has created a standard of beauty in India which is only limited to women with fair skin. These advertisements show show fairness creams as not just determinants of beauty, but also confidence and success. This not only has a detrimental impact on the mental illness of dark skinned women but also contributes to their stigmatization in workplaces and social circles. Patriarchy also enables this skin color of women to shape their perception over their professions, qualifications or skills (Leistikow, 2013). A similar criticism is faced by companies who exclusively use zero sized models in their marketing mix. The 'size zero' culture which was prevalent in the past decade did not only cost the lives of many aspiring models but also created

very restrictive narratives on what 'beauty' was. These narratives stigmatized those who could not match the set standards of 'beauty'. However, in the past decade, there has been an active movement against the glorification of the 'zero-size' figure. After the death of Luisel Ramos, an Uruguayan model due to anorexia in August, 2006, the Madrid Fashion Week and the Milan Fashion Week banned size zero models. Israel was the first country to ban size zero models in its fashion industry in totality (Turner, 2012). Moreover this has also created pressure on fashion companies to stop the use of plus size models. Brands such as Armani and Prada have agreed to ban plus size models from their events (Metro, 2006). This shift in narrative has spilled over from the fashion industry to other forums of pop culture such as movies, music videos and television. In the light of the '#metoo movement', Gillette released an advertisement on 2019 where it condemned the perpetuation of toxic masculinity and nudjed men to improve their behavior towards women and each other to create a more healthy environment for people of multiple identities to co-exist in (Tiffany, 2019). Therefore, corporates have the ability to change negative narratives and perceptions of those who form 'out-groups' in social settings if they seriously take the initiative to.

Recently, there has been a trend of a symbiotic relationship being formed between corporates and marginalized communities. Corporates try to include their voices, ideologies and demands in their marketing and advertising campaigns. This helps in increasing visibility and awareness and is a significant step towards normalizing social perceptions. Pink capitalism, also known as rainbow capitalism, is defined as the targeted incorporation of the LGBT movement and the idea of sexual diversity into capitalism and the market economy. When communities such as the LGBT community start gaining purchasing power, corporations try to include them in the market by catering to their specific needs. Thus, theoretically, it benefits both parties, the corporates because of an increase in their market share and marginalized communities because the creation of positive narratives through marketing and advertising help in negating stereotypes.

However, 'pink capitalism' suffers from two major problems. It is argued that the only representation that is achieved is one that is tokenistic and based on convenience. Almost all inclusion is given to those who are privileged within are minority community (Eg- urban, upper class white gay men from the LGBT community). People only accommodate identities that they can conveniently engage with, and they continue to ignore the diversity that exists in the spectrum of gender and sexuality. The impact of such representation is also questionable. Capitalist structures as a whole do not become accommodative of diverse identities while they continue to remain heteronormative and perpetuate cultures of casual sexism, workplace discrimination and other exclusionary behavior. Moreover, this gives companies and organizations the ability to shed away responsibility and continue problematic behavior under the

garb of tokenistic representation and benefits. Companies like Barclays and JP morgan and even the government of Israel has faced criticism along the same lines (Dahl, 2014).

DISCRIMINATION WITHIN MOVEMENTS

Social Movements have been the driving force behind the inclusion of counter cultures and diverse identities in mainstream discourse. Beyond running independent campaigns, they also partner with corporates for the CSR programs, and the government to bring issues faced by a marginalized community in the forefront, so policy can be made to counter them. Organizations like the 'Humsafar Trust' and the 'Naz Foundation' have taken up the role of representing queer issues in India.

However, social organizations and NGOs can also tend to be discriminatory towards some of their members. This is because of the multiple intersectional identities that members of a group associate to. Therefore, power structure pervade and create 'ingroups' and 'out-groups' within a movement that fights for the emancipation of one overarching identity. This was first argued by black feminist scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989 (Norman, 2017). Intersectionality argues that various forms of social stratification, such as class, race, sexual orientation, religion, disability and gender, do not exist separately from each other but are interlinked. Though this started off as a critique to the feminist movement, its implications can be seen in all social movements. There is a critique of 'Western feminists' by 'Third World feminists' and 'transitional feminists' which for hegemonizing discourse related to feminism by those women who are positioned in places of privilege themselves. It talks about how rich, white women from progressive societies have started to control narratives over what feminism should be to the level of it causing harm to less privileged members of the society across the borders of a country in a globalized world. Movements such as 'Free the Nipple' have been criticized for alienating a large section population of women living who haven't been exposed to progressive western values and taking away limelight from basic goals that women in the third world strive towards (Stauffer, 2016). Growing emphasis on political correctness by the privileged also takes the ability to critique movements and bring an evolution in discourse, hence perpetuating the hegemony that they maintain (Gallagher, 2017). It is also criticized for hampering creativity and freedom of speech in pop-culture and college campuses (Young, 2017).There have also been incidents of more explicit discrimination in social movements. The 'Chicago Dyke March', a LGBT collective in the United States, banned the display of the national flag of Israel in their pride parade, whilst allowing the display of flags of other nationalities. The subjectivity involved in the decision making of those in positions of power in movements is often questioned on the basis of it being a result of their own bias and tendency to discriminate against one or many of

the intersecting identities that people associate themselves to. This can also be seen as the manifestation of 'pinkwashing' in social movements (Haaretz, 2017).

CONCLUSION

There is significant reason to conclude that pop-culture and its representation of and behavior towards members of the 'out-group' dictates the way those individuals are treated and understood by people in their surroundings, corporates, even social movements themselves. The presence of intersecting identities within the stigmatized community makes representations and depictions more nuanced. Therefore, there is a need for these groups to take responsibility and accountability for their actions. Corporates must move away from the culture of 'tokenistic representation' and strive for making structures more inclusive and accommodating of identity. Individual and collective responsibility to remove stigma based on identity must be taken by all those whose actions impact the thinking of the public. Governments can pass legislation to regulate media, like Israel has, in its move to ban zero-size models. Most importantly, there is a need for all individuals to recognize their privilege and shape their behavior in a way that those who do not have such privilege do not face social stigma and marginalization.

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