Gender narratives in 'New Normal' information age

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Abstract

In a bid to interpret the narratives as experienced and shared by female learners in online technology-mediated communication, the present study aims to explore the use of online e learning platforms during and post COVID 19 by graduate and post-graduate female students studying in Assam. Two specific research questions that arise here are: 1. What are the types of ICT tools commonly used by female learners for participation in online education? 2. What are the challenges and opportunities of technology-oriented education on technology-literate and technology-illiterate female learners?

In this context, a few theoretical orientations on Social Learning Theory and Social Presence Theory have been referred to further understand the socio-cultural narratives of female learners. Additionally, theoretical frameworks such as Technology Acceptance Model, Actor Network Theory, Gender and ICT, and Diffusion of Innovation are employed to find out the impact of online mode of imparting education in leveraging the development and social participation of female students during COVID 19 times. The study is expected to demystify the evolving interpersonal communication patterns and unknown narratives of gender in online education platforms which have hitherto been unexplored and unknown. The conclusions are drawn based on both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. The study overall aims to shed light on the concerns and opportunities in the adoption of online digital technologies for learning pedagogy to largely benefit the female learners.

Keywords: COVID 19, Gender, ICT, digital divide

Introduction

Teaching-Learning pedagogy both in online and offline are poles apart. Similarly, the acceptance of technology innovation with respect to learning aid differs among female learners. The notion of technological divide among young learners is quite not clear as availability of technology is not mere the criteria of technology literacy and acceptance. Online classrooms are representation of a closed space with a virtual screen which allows the discourse among the 'active' and 'inactive' participants and establish a social connectedness for a limited time and space.

The concept of digital divide is not new but the process is visible in most important spheres of life. With context to Covid 19, there has been a massive transformation in the way teaching learning pedagogy got moulded into a new power structure in imparting learning environment virtually. There has been a paradigm shift in our society with the context of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in new 'e-learning' environment (During and post Covid 19). It is just not the technology that changed the learning behavior but the sudden worldwide pandemic led every learner to adopt to new 'normal' age. With reference to E. M Rogers's Diffusion of Innovation theory 1962, it can be cited that the number of early majority category is more in terms of adoption of innovation during COVID times. However, the number of

adopters in late majority category were comparatively less as due to COVID outbreak it was mandatory to adopt to new technology to stay safe and work from home. Unlike many other sectors in India, education sector is the worst affected as the entire process of acquiring knowledge and physical presence in learning institutes got shifted to virtual classrooms. The very notion of physical learning and training in classrooms got demystified with launch of new online technological tools of education. It is quite interesting to learn and see how new innovation or technology controls the human emotions and needs. To explain the new 'normal' phenomenon of teaching and learning behaviour of young learners, Uses and Gratification theory can be referred to understand how a specific media can gratify users' needs and wants. An entire gamut of academia, scholars and learners got motivated to adopt and practice new learning skills and techniques in the world. With the different technology service providers, the idea of co-learning also got shaped in various formats and form. For example, Google Meet, Webex, Zoom, Microsoft Team, Skype, Google Duo, Whatsapp are the most used online platforms to interact and exchange ideas/knowledge during and after COVID times. With each different service provider, the level of interactivity is also different and unique. The present study aims to explore the use of online e-learning platforms during and post COVID 19 by graduate and post-graduate female students studying in Assam. Two specific research questions that arise here are: 1. What are the types of ICT tools commonly used by female learners for participation in online education? 2. What are the challenges and opportunities of technology-oriented education on technology-literate and technology-illiterate female learners?

Theoretical Orientation

The present article is an attempt to understand impact of technology on users and understand the theoretical orientations on users' learning behavior by looking into different perspectives of technology acceptance. There is an attempt to establish a relationship between factors of technology acceptance with socio-cultural and psychological parameters. As humans are quick learners, there has been a rich resource of theories that relate the behavioural and technological adoption of innovation and discovery. Jurgen Habermas' concept of public sphere can be related to online learning where virtual classrooms are public space for academic discourse.

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1961) is one of the most influential works to understand human learning and behavior. It is important to see a how learners are conditioned to a process and how they adapt the learning behaviour. Similarly, with new technological tools, the users first observe the process and later attempts to imitate it for their overall learning irrespective of gender.

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It is quite interesting to learn and see how new innovation or technology controls the human emotions and needs. To explain the new 'normal' phenomenon of teaching and learning behaviour of young learners, Blumler and Katz's Uses and Gratification theory (1974) can be referred to understand how a specific media can gratify users' needs and wants. It is quite

interesting to learn and examine new innovation or technology controls the human emotions and needs. To explain the new 'normal' phenomenon of teaching and learning behavior of young learners, Uses and Gratification theory can be referred to understand how a specific media can gratify users' needs and wants. With the Social Presence Theory, there is an attempt to understand how learners interact socially online and challenges associated with online learning among female learners. As the existing literature hints on different aspects of social presence theory, the present research work emphasizes on the gender perspective.

In order to understand the acceptability of new technological tools among users and modifications required, Technological Acceptance Model (TAM) has been referred here to find out the variables involved in using technology.

Specific Objectives of the Study

1. What are the types of ICT tools commonly used by female learners for participation in online education?

2. What are the challenges and opportunities of technology-oriented education on technology-literate and technology-illiterate female learners?

Research Questions

RQ1. What are the factors that contribute to social learning among female learners on online mode?

RQ2. What are the key interpersonal skills adopted by the learners?

RQ3. Which online tools were commonly used by female learners to acquire knowledge during Covid 19?

RQ4. Whether technology a divide or bridge for female learners in higher education?

Research Methodology

With the help of a questionnaire, that consisted of both open ended and close ended questions, the responses of female learners of undergraduate and post graduate level of Tezpur University, Assam were collected. Also, in online discussion, the female participants were asked about the challenges and opportunities of using online mode of learning during COVID.

Gender and ICT

Worldwide, though there is a gender divide with respect to the usage of ICT and e governance, still ICT is considered as a force for gender equality and empowerment.

For instance, the Beijing declaration (2005) of the United Nations considers ICT as a platform where the long existing problem of gender discrimination could be resolved.

Discrimination on this ground, most reasonably refers to inaccessibility. ICT intervention has changed the concept of accessibility with its ability to provide an open source of data access and a virtual access to institutions that have become digital in character. The digitalisation of events and documents has broken the earlier existing gender stereotyped roles in the societies across the world. ICT has given the women folk an impetus for their social, cultural and political existence. ICT intervention visiblises their roles that is not only restricted to a limited set of duties and responsibilities. Rather, ICT has increased their participation which was earlier restricted due to physical constraints.

Samia Melhem, Claudia Morrell and Nidhi Tandon (2009) in their working paper, "Information and Communication Technologies for Women's Socioeconomic Empowerment" published by the World Bank have reflected upon the increasing need for the adoption of

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for women's empowerment. They consider ICTs as a true enabler of gender equity across different regions of the world. The authors have opined that "ICTs are profoundly affecting social structures" (Melhem et al, 2009, p.v). However, as the authors have pointed out, the assumption that ICTs can enable gender equity is "constrained by, access, low literacy, and limited data for ICT usage by women" (Ibid.). When it comes to the role of ICTs in women's empowerment, the authors opine that, "There is an enormous need for research to fully understand the issues of women, gender, and ICTs as the issues are very complex and the research is thin" (Ibid., p. vii). In such circumstances, there is a need for research in different contextual settings across the regions of the world. It is further stated by Melhem et al. that, "the research that exists relating to ICTs is often country specific, is more prevalent from developed than developing countries, and is often not disaggregated by gender" (Ibid.).

Despite the impending difficulties with respect to ICTs and its implementation in governance, "the basic assumption [is] that all members of our global community benefit from and are part of the growing knowledge society" (Ibid., p. 1), is often questionable, as the authors have pointed out, "ICTs have been compared with a double-edged sword—advancing the knowledge society on one hand, and deepening gender and social divides on the other" (Ibid.). On this note the authors argue for a "thoughtful policy, strategy, and execution plan to ensure women's full engagement in the knowledge society" (Ibid.).

As the authors further point out, women in underdeveloped and low income countries basically face problems in four areas: 1. Access and use of ICTs, 2. Usability and literacy, 3. Development and design, and 4. Leadership and power (Ibid., p. 2). But, the authors also state that women's use of ICTs "has strong and powerful impact on their participation in the knowledge society" (Ibid). Melhem et al further opine: ICTs provide new model for knowledge dissemination, diffusion, and creation that could, if developed correctly, address a long standing, intransigent problem of education, access and empowerment. To be able to benefit from the new knowledge society, one must have the education and literacy needed to use ICTs, as well as have access. (Ibid., p. 9)

Not only, women from the urban centres and educated masses, but also, as the authors note, "women from the grass roots are using ICTs to expand their mission and drive their passion to improve the world" (Ibid., p. 13). Asserting to Gurumurthy et al, the authors have further pointed out that, "There is a growing reality that women's engagement in ICTs is important for multiple forms of development, including social and political justice" (Gurumurthy et al, 2006, p. 35-41, cited in Melhem et al., 2009, p. 13).

Information and Communication Technologies are seen as propellant of empowerment and development. Considering this fact, the United Nations has taken an active role in the promotion of Information and Communication Technologies as a tool of development. Even the millennium declaration 2000 recognises the need of ICT and its availability to a wider section of the population of the world. The UN declaration at Beijing (2005) entitled "Gender equality and empowerment of women through ICT" states: If, however, the gender dimensions of ICT—in terms of access and use, capacity-building opportunities, employment and potential for empowerment—are explicitly identified and addressed, ICT can be a powerful catalyst for political and social empowerment of women, and the promotion of gender equality. (UN

declaration Beijing, 2005, p. 3) The declaration considers inequality in access to ICT as digital divide. As per the declaration, though there is a great potentiality in ICT to promote gender equality and empowerment, a gender divide still exists as "reflected in the lower number of women accessing and using ICT compared with men" (Ibid.)

It has been widely accepted that an ICT revolution propels a knowledge economy. But at the same time, it is not free from its own contradictions. The National Knowledge

ICT and the Great Divide

Pippa Norris (2001), in his book "Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide" gives an interesting account of the pressing issue of digital divide from multiple perspectives. The author has reflected upon the concept of Information Technology and e-governance from social, political and cultural angles. The book analyses how the very concept of digital divide has its impact on the other aspects of the society because of the strong connection between ICT and socio-cultural phenomena. As the author has argued, digital divide, in turn generates democratic divide, as a certain section of the population are left out of the democratic process in an increasingly digitalised society. This has further given birth to new and emerging concepts like digital politics. The author notes: Digital technologies hold promise as a mechanism facilitating alternative channels of civic engagement such as political chat rooms, electronic voting in general elections and for referenda issues, and the mobilisation of virtual communities, revitalizing mass participation in public affairs.

The use of the Internet by groups and social movements is often believed to exemplify digital politics...Yet as the Internet evolved, a darker vision has been articulated among cyber pessimists who regard digital technology as a Pandora's box unleashing new inequalities of power and wealth, reinforcing deeper divisions between the information rich and poor, the tuned-in and tuned-out, the activists and the disengaged. (Norris, 2001, p.13)

This suggests that information technology and its applications in the daily lives of the individuals around the globe are seen from both an optimists' view, who considers ICT and e governance as the panacea of development and growth, and the pessimists' view that digital technology as a tool of development also creates divide among techno haves and techno have nots. The author has also argued that the existing digital divide across the world further leads to democratic divide as there a gap exists "between those who do and do not use the multiple political resources available on the Internet for civic engagement" (Ibid., p.12).

The author perceives the whole scenario of ICT and its resulting impact on the society from both the optimists and pessimists/skeptics perspective. To the optimists, as the author has opined, "Internet has the capacity to reduce, although not wholly eradicate, traditional inequalities between information-rich and –poor both between and within societies. In contrasts, pessimists believe that the digital technologies will reinforce and exacerbate existing disparities" (Ibid., p. 26). Digital divide as the author has suggested often leads to social inequalities that split the society across, racial, gender and class lines. With respect to gender, the author argues that the result is inconclusive in nature as different surveys give different results with regard to ICT usage by women. Even though some countries claim that they have achieved gender parity in terms of ICT usage, still there exists a division across gender when it comes to ICT usage in many of the developed and developing countries of the world.

Similarly, on the issue of e-governance, Norris (2001) views that it is seen from both the cyber optimists and cyber-pessimists perspectives. While, the former are hopeful of the benefits arising out of digital technologies in the form of ICT and egovernance, the later doubt over the capacity of the governments to adapt to the new environment offered through ICT technology for governance and administration. The author has also opined that ICT and its implementation in the e-governance is a recent phenomenon and political institutions and other agencies have started to adopt it only during the last few years. He further argues that "the main potential of digital technologies for government, cyber-optimists suggests, lies in strengthening policy, effectiveness, political accountability, and to a lesser extent public participation"

(Ibid., p. 112). However, such a claim made by the author is contestable in different contexts of ICT and e-governance implementation. In the context of India and its different states including Assam, how far ICT and e-governance implementation have been able to fulfil the above criteria are still undiscovered and questionable. As the author has further opined, "Many observe that although governments have developed websites to promote 'top-down" publicity, and even state propaganda, there are few opportunities so far via these media for genuine "bottom-up" interaction, public criticism, or discursive deliberation" (Ibid., p. 114). Such an explanation, however questions the general assumption that ICT facilitates greater participation in the government process.

Andrew Skuse, Joan Fildes, Jo Tacchi, Kirsty Martin, and Emma Baulch (2007) in a UNESCO report "Poverty and Digital Inclusion" have conducted an ethnographic action research to understand the positive effects of ICT in context of India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. They have pointed out that ICTs can be beneficial to the marginalised communities in the South Asian countries. If ICT is promoted recognising the local social networks and different cultural contexts, then it can really contribute to the development of the marginalised communities. With a participatory approach, the study conducted by the Skuse et al., is directed towards, "Inclusion and participation in social, political and economic processes, meaning making, autonomy and expression" (Skuse et al, 2007).

The study as the authors note: "Is a multi-sited qualitative study of poverty and information and communication technologies (ICTs) in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia" (Ibid., p. 1). Through a participatory action research, the study analyses the level and condition of poverty from various perspectives and attempts for solutions using Information and Communication Technologies. With this, the study as part of its objective, also aims at enhancing the abilities of the local communities in content creation using ICTs to facilitate their participation in the social, economic, cultural, and political spheres. The authors understand poverty from a larger context that includes the inability to use Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). The authors contend,

Understanding and experiences of poverty may display a range of similar features across a wide array of locations, but each location will display its own very particular characteristics and nuances. Given our particular focus on ICTs and poverty we also need to understand differences in and between different groups and locations in terms of access and engagement with information and communication sources, content and channels. (Ibid., p. 4)

Like poverty, digital divide as the authors have argued have wider connotations than how it is generally been understood. Even the concept of digital divide varies depending upon the

contexts in which a digital technology is adopted. As the authors note: "Digital inclusion refers to more than physical access to digital technologies. It relates to the relationship between ICTs, agency and context, therein raising issues of access versus effective use or engagement" (Ibid., p. 36).

Rosemarie Gannon (2008) in her article, "Digital divides within households" argue that ICTs have the potentiality to eliminate the importance of physical proximity to a whole host of economic, social, cultural and political activities, thereby making rural areas more attractive locations for businesses, services and people.

Situating digital divide in an Irish context, the author has analysed how there a divide persists in terms of ICT usage in the household. The study claims how ICT can be a beneficial tool among the rural Irish community in the daily affairs of the household.

The author has opined that even in a household the factors like age, gender and education influence ICT usage and contribute towards digital divide.

Findings:

Most of the female learners agreed that advancement of technology in learning has helped them to acquire knowledge during COVID times without any difficulty. And the respondents have expressed that ICT is not a challenge for female learners. However, geographical limitations and non-availability of network has act as hindrance in getting proper information during online classes. The participation of female learners is no less compared to male learners. The narratives also highlighted on the empowerment of women in terms of using technology for development. The major findings also reflect on the role of ICTs in developing cognitive needs and wants of female learners.

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