



Digital Selves: Transgender Identity and Makeup Narratives in Kerala's YouTube Culture

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Abstract: *This paper seeks to explore the emergence and impact of transgender digital storytelling on Kerala's transgender community, focusing on how celebrity transgender makeup artists like Renju Renjimar, Surya Ishaan and Seema Vineeth use YouTube not only for self-representation but also, as a tool for empowerment and visibility for marginalized identities. Using visual ethnography and qualitative content analysis, the study examines how these creators leverage technology and make-up to change the stigmatization of transpeople. This investigation analyses the narrative techniques and audience interactions within these videos to explain how the digital presence of the aforementioned make-up artistes serves as both an act of self-expression and an act of activism. Situating the creator stories within the broader framework of digital humanities and gender studies, this study explores how identity, technology and gender intersect to reshape traditional narratives on gender and visibility. The study concludes that these videos create a digital space for these Trans individuals to engage with larger gender discourses, facilitating a more diverse and inclusive representation of gender identities in mainstream media. This research contributes to the understanding of digital gender and how digital platforms offer a voice for the voiceless by fostering a Queer inclusive digital culture.*

Keywords: *Identity, Transgender, Stigma, Trauma, Digital media*

Introduction

In June 2005, YouTube as a platform was launched with no public fanfare. It quickly emerged as one of the most widely used digital platforms in the world, becoming a major hub for video sharing and user generated content (Burgess and Green 25). When YouTube first launched its tagline, it was "your digital video repository" and later the tagline changed to "broadcast yourself." As a result, vlogging gained popularity and contributed to the emergence of new online communities and varied content cultures on YouTube. Individuals were able to generate and distribute self-produced content to a wider audience through this platform, as it offered a



space for user participation, engagement and creative expression (Jenkins 135). This visibility allows creators to present themselves and their lived realities in their own way. As a visual medium, it also serves as a means of subversion against social norms and stereotypes regarding gender identities. In this context YouTube has emerged as a significant space for minorities like transpeople. It offers them a democratic and accessible platform to tell their stories without the gatekeeping of traditional media structures.

Kerala has a lively digital media environment, in which local, linguistic and cultural phenomena interconnect with worldwide trends. YouTube being diversified to support content generation in Malayalam, allows for hyper-local presences to be created. In tandem with this, it speaks of universal struggles of gender, identity and empowerment. This cultural evolution is evident in the emergence of queer YouTubers and trans creators like Renju Renjimar, Seema Vineeth and Surya Ishaan, who have paved the way for digital gender inclusivity in strides. Transgender digital narratives have been developed to highlight the ways in which transgender people use digital platforms to tell their stories and life struggles. According to Son Vivienne this digital storytelling enables the Trans creators to negotiate their “visibility and privacy” (Vivienne 45). In the context of Kerala, such narratives, backed by the spirit of the 2015 Transgender Rights Policy, in societal inclusion through participation in media and cultural spheres. YouTube channels bring recognition to Trans communities in Kerala, in turn boosting policy level discussions.

Makeup serves as a means of both artistic expression and economic independence for all the three creators whose videos are selected for the study, who have earned wide recognition as professional makeup artists of high calibre. This kind of content reclaims beauty standards and blurs the gender binaries, contributing to the empowerment discourse in Kerala’s digital space and helping in community building.

Literature Review

Poornima R's "Through the Cracks of the Gendered World" is a critical review of the lacunae in limitations inherent within the Transgender Policy of Kerala and its implementation, which deconstructs systemic issues. Sharma, in his work "The Use of Social Media", explains how media platforms like YouTube empower LGBTQ+ individuals to raise awareness, express themselves and attain financial independence. In "Makeup and Gender Performance", Nayar and Prasad examine makeup as a medium of gender affirmation and empowerment, focusing on the transformative role it plays online. Kumar and Gupta, in their work "Queer Digital Culture and Resistance," argue that digital platforms pave the way for collective resistance against heteronormativity and situate Trans and other Queer creators as agents of cultural change. Further, in "A Space of Their Own," by Habin H., it emerges how the media helped Kerala's transgender community claim their ground for social and cultural participation and activism. While there are various studies related to transgender representation in Indian digital media, research that locates Kerala's transgender YouTube content precisely as a tool of visibility, empowerment, and building cultural narratives, remains limited. Previous studies have focused on physical sites such as pride parades and have not considered YouTube as a



site for digital ethnography. Further, makeup as a medium of gender expression, skill sharing, and socio-economic empowerment through Kerala's transgender YouTube platforms remains underexplored.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach, drawing on content analysis, gender studies, and visual ethnography to analyse YouTube videos of Kerala's Trans creators, namely Renju Renjimar, Seema Vineeth, and Soorya Ishaan. These methods and approaches help study digital storytelling, the socio-political relevance of the content, and the audience engagement with it. Videos are examined on the basis of their themes of gender performance, stigmatization, visibility, and empowerment through makeup transformations, along with personal narratives. Such an examination provides insights into the ways digital tools contribute to the shaping of transgender identity and resistance within the socio-cultural framework of Kerala. Visual ethnography also helps with an in-depth analysis of the techniques of digital storytelling, such as the structure of the video, the aesthetics of visuals, and body language. Comments from the audience were studied for perceptions among the general public and for changes in attitudes toward transgender people in Kerala. These data were coded for the patterns in the discourse which are linked to difficulties, support, and finally prejudice. The study ultimately analyses technology as a method and media for activism and self-expression. In this context, makeup assumes performative and affirmative possibilities of use; it merges the tasks of validating gender identities and garnering economic opportunities. This paper situates the research within the contexts of digital humanities to explore how the Trans YouTubers of Kerala reshape traditional narratives on gender, challenging stigma by building inclusive online spaces for themselves and their community members.

Digital Storytelling: Transgender Identity and Representation

The rise of transgender creators like Renju Renjimar, Seema Vineeth and Surya Ishan, has profoundly impacted how gender, identity and visibility are represented in Kerala's YouTube culture. Their online presence highlights how YouTube is more than just a digital entertainment platform. It serves as a platform where marginalized identities are performed, negotiated and legitimized. By documenting transgender life through autobiographical narratives, emotional confessions, beauty practices, interviews, etc., these channels serve as a collective digital archive. These depictions enable alternative venues for social connection and identity articulation. They challenge stigmatized representations of transpeople in popular culture.

The online existence of Renju Renjimar shows the changing power of being seen within internet systems. She has shared hundreds of visual recordings and received millions of views, thereby growing into a persona who is way larger than an ordinary beauty expert. The materials shared by Renju Renjimar, which involve instructional sessions for cosmetics, food preparation videos, skin health talks, academic information and regular life moments, allow people to connect with Renju Renjimar as a teacher, business owner, provider of care, and societal leader instead of just as a transgender woman. Experts claim that this way of showing oneself matches



the idea that social media platforms demand constant visibility and self-branding (Marwick 39).

The exchanges between Renju and her viewers make the emotional aspects of online exposure visible. When Renju is linked to the name “Renju Maa” by the community members, viewers place her within the structures of maternal care and physical and emotional support. Many researchers claim that such reactions from observers challenge the narrow biological definitions of female identity and motherhood, because Renju shows that providing guidance and social assistance are valid and important aspects being a mother which go beyond the biological act of giving birth. They constitute what is called ‘affiliative motherhood.’ Here, there is an interesting inversion and powerful upending of stereotypes as gender is performed and constituted by the very acts that are said to be its results (Butler 25). Renju’s online presence proves that constant acts of attentive support, aesthetic practice, emotional intimacy, and social duty create a powerful female and maternal image within digital space.

Through her YouTube videos, Renju addresses major issues and movements going on with and around the transgender community in Kerala. Her vlogs amplify narratives of resilience, empowerment, and collective solidarity, while addressing critical themes like social stigma, familial rejection and professional success. A perfect example can be drawn from her interview with John Brittas, journalist and Rajya Sabha MP, in which she talks about the pain of societal exclusion and familial disapproval, thus underlining the psychological and emotional challenges faced by the transpeople. Her efforts to uplift the transgender community are appreciated by most of her viewers. Some key areas of Renju’s work include her contribution to initiatives like The Dwaya Charitable Society, a Kochi-based non-governmental organization that works for the betterment of transpeople in Kerala. It performs such necessary measures as providing education and training, legal and health services to support transgender people. She has also facilitated the weddings of many transwomen, mentored aspiring makeup artistes and helped several transpeople gain financial freedom. The audience responses to her digital stories highlight the immense appreciation that Renju receives for her efforts to improve the lives of her community members. Her channel becomes a platform for active community building, empowerment and professional aspiration rather than merely a space for entertainment.

The digital narratives of Seema Vineeth similarly stress the means through which identity, vulnerability and resilience are negotiated within the socio-cultural framework of Kerala. Through her YouTube videos and interviews, Seema Vineeth talks about her life experiences and trauma regarding her body transformation, gender dysphoria, societal exclusion and much more. She transforms her personal trauma into a shared digital discourse by sharing these concerns with the public. To cite Bell Hooks, her visibility becomes a gesture of defiance as she moves from silence into speech (Hooks 9). From this standpoint, YouTube becomes an alternative space that enables transpeople to share their private emotional trauma that is usually not addressed in the social arena.



The institutional discrimination faced by transgender communities in Kerala is a recurrent theme in Seema's videos. Society's usual tendency to label Trans individuals as sex workers and outcasts is questioned by Seema. She projects this as a systemic failure where transpeople are forced into sex work because of the lack of opportunities and social discrimination. Through her videos, Seema Vineeth asks integral questions, such as why society denies them dignity and opportunities, and why government institutions and policies do not serve them the way they serve cis-gender citizens. Seema places her personal stories within the larger structure of discrimination faced by the transgender community. Her work not only highlights the importance of digital spaces in creating visibility for marginalized communities, but also amplifies the impact of storytelling as a tool for social change.

Alongside these Trans creators, Surya Ishaan also contributes to this discussion on gender visibility and identity through her videos. Surya and her partner Ishan are recognized as the first trans-couple in India. Through discussions on love, sexuality, intimacy, and family structure, they deconstruct the heteronormative assumptions about these topics. According to Surya, transgender people have emotional needs, desires, and aspirations for life just as anybody else. In her videos, she argues that transgender individuals should have access to family life, marriage, and meaningful companionship. The desire for social connection expressed here resonates with Munoz's assertion that "Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world." (Munoz 19)

As a transwoman married to a transman, her vlogs share the real life experiences of a trans couple. She consistently uses her social media visibility to question the heteronormative notions regarding gender. Her videos prove that like others, transpeople are quite capable of leading a healthy and happy family life. It is important to note that she has built a strong network of supportive viewers. This shows how digital platforms like YouTube create visibility, which fosters acceptance and public acknowledgement. Apart from gendered perceptions, people connect with her content because of the experiences they identify with. It helps in understanding transgender identity as natural and breaking cis-normativity. With her videos she is normalizing what it is to be a transwoman and simultaneously exposing the exclusionist tendencies of the society that she lives in. Through her content, Surya Ishan creates space for a more nuanced understanding of gender and bodies in Kerala's digital space.

The YouTube channels of Renju Renjimar, Seema Vineeth and Soorya Ishan read through the lens of digital humanities and gender studies operate as a repository of transgender experiences in the Kerala context. They also function as sites of queer embodiment. These Trans content creators are becoming the voice of their community, by creating content on social media representing themselves as they are and challenging cis-normative narratives.

Makeup as Empowerment: A Symbol of Gender Affirmation and Self-Expression

Makeup plays a significant role in the lives of Renju Renjimr, Seema Vineeth, and Surya Ishaan. It's more than just an aesthetic practice for these creators. Their identity, livelihood,



gender affirmation, and professional reputation are all built on it. Faced with marginalization, make-up provides emotional strength and helps with their empowerment.

Makeup becomes a lifeline for Renju Renjimar. It functions as a medium to bring forth her femininity and contributes to self-recognition. As she fondly recollects in one of her YouTube videos, burnt matchsticks and leaves became her initial makeup tools during her teenage years. This affinity towards make-up demonstrates how she externalizes her internalized feminine identity. These iterated performances legitimize Queer identities in society. She candidly shares her years of isolation and eventual success as Kerala's first transgender celebrity makeup artist, inspiring viewers to dream beyond the restrictive frames of society. Renju explains that makeup is a tool for transformation, both physical and emotional, in several videos and interviews. For her, makeup artistry not only means gender affirmation, but also represents professional empowerment. Her message resonates deep in the transgender community of Kerala due to the limited job opportunities available for transpeople because of the widespread discrimination that exists in society. By sharing her journey, Renju provides a road map for others seeking careers in non-traditional fields, while normalizing the presence of transgender individuals in public-facing professions.

In her YouTube videos Seema Vineeth shares how she faced societal discrimination, emotional and economic hardships during her early years as a transwoman. It is through becoming a makeup artist that she was able to transform her life. In a society where transgender individuals are attacked and forced into sex work, makeup becomes a saviour for Seema. Practicing makeup as a professional gives her independence and dignity. Her bridal makeup tutorials and live makeup sessions are testimony to her economic success. It also indicates a world where feminism is gradually opening its frames to incorporate the transgender identity. Her success as a makeup artist sends an important message about Trans empowerment through a skill monetization model for vocational participation within the community. Audience interactions also point toward the evolving attitudes of Kerala with respect to transgender identities. Viewers feel pride in her journey; a comment reads, "You inspire so many of us with your journey," which underlines how personal narratives become important in the creation of inclusive social spaces.

Surya Ishaan as a professional makeup artist uses makeup tutorials as much for aesthetic skill as for self-expression and empowerment. This mirrors the greater narrative of Trans digital activism, where digital platforms such as YouTube allow Trans individuals to create self-identity and subvert traditional notions of gender. Surya's tutorials encourage transpeople to take on beauty practices as a means of asserting their identity and, therefore, bridging the gap between personal transformation and public representation. The focus on beauty enables the conversation about economic empowerment. The expertise in makeup artistry is a means for Surya to achieve financial independence and professional success. She insists that makeup artists should be well dressed and professional with clients. Makeup as a profession requires discipline, presentation of self and personal commitment. This view of hers aligns with the



concept that “visibility and presentation become central to professional identity formation within digital economies.” (Marwick 37)

Conclusion

This paper positions YouTube as a site of transformation in the lives of Kerala's transgender community and an important site of visibility, empowerment, and cultural resistance. While the liberal policies of Kerala, including the State Policy for Transgenders (2015), laid the base for socio-cultural inclusiveness, YouTube and other digital media empowered them by allowing them to reclaim their lives. As Sharma writes in *The Use of Social Media*, creators such as Renju Renjimar, Seema Vineeth, and Soorya Ishaan cut across all boundaries of the medium in using YouTube for self-expression, skill sharing and economic self-reliance. The study also points out the underexplored importance of makeup as a performative and affirming tool. Research into the performance of gender in general underlines how transformations and beauty tutorials are actions that help validate and celebrate gender through acts of performativity against the dominant norms for cash inflow. This corroborates the assertion of Kumar and Gupta on how digital space allowed the Queer community to offer a united resistance to the imposition of heteronormativity. While all this points to the increasing relevance of Trans digital storytelling, some blind spots in academic discourse require filling. Underutilization of visual ethnography and qualitative content analysis persists in researching YouTube as a digital ethnographic site of Kerala's transgender community. This would enrich our understanding of gendered digital spaces and the ways in which transgender creators of Kerala positively redefine their identities and reclaim their agency within the socio-cultural milieu. Eventually, YouTube appeared not only as a means of visibility but also as a site of social change, contributing to building a bigger narrative of empowerment and inclusivity pertinent to Kerala's transgender community. It is through digital media that their positions are strengthened as active participants in Kerala's evolving sociopolitical culture by fostering representation, creating economic opportunities, and challenging patriarchal norms.

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