

The Double Bind of Digital Emotion: A Sociological Study of Gendered Emotional Expression among Women on Social Media

Qiaolin Lu

*Guangdong Overseas Chinese High School International Curriculum, Guangzhou, China
jessicama@tsinglin.com.cn*

Abstract. The present study proposes a qualitative study of how women navigate gendered emotional norms in social media. In an era where being online is intrinsically linked to one's identity, women often find themselves in a challenging position where they are encouraged to be authentic and emotionally open, but they are frequently penalized for expressing emotions like anger or uncontrollable distress that are deemed socially inappropriate for their gender. The research question explores social and psychological consequences of these performances, the ways female subjects handle their online presence of emotions, and the way they perceive social regulations of online emotional display. A digital ethnographic approach involving semi-structured interviews with young adult women will be used in this study to explore the lived experiences of expressing emotion in a digital mediated world. The projected results will carry significant implications in the spheres of gender studies, digital sociology, and emotion studies, as it will show how in traditional online condition, the traditional gender stereotypes are challenged and reproduced. This project is aimed to shed light on the unseen emotional labour of women in their day to day lives and its effect on their well-being and social identity.

Keywords: emotional labor, gender performativity, digital sociology, social media, emotional expression, double bind

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

The spread of social media has essentially changed the environment of human interaction and self-presentation [1]. Instagram, X (used to be Twitter) and Facebook are not solely communication platforms but rather platforms on which people build and enact their identities to a networked audience [2]. The social and cultural norms that largely affect this performance, especially, gender ones [3]. Traditionally, sociological and psychological studies have revealed that the society has different feeling rules of men and women; women are usually supposed to be nurturing, empathetic and emotional, whereas men are conditioned to be stoic, reserved and assertive [4]. The online community has formed a high-stress society in which friends and unfamiliar people scrutinize,

evaluate, and confirm emotional tantrums constantly, thereby increasing the salience of these demands [5]. This school of thought offers the outline to relating the way these ingrained traditions have been executed in to the distinctive organizational planning of web-based platforms, and traces back to the sociology of gender and feeling [6].

The theoretical ground that regards social interaction as a performance is extended in this work [7]. In these performances, the digital world is being used as an innovative and complex theatrical stage where the lineage between the personal and the collective self grows more blurred [8]. One example of a kind of digital emotional labor which comes outside of the workplace into people's personal life is the pressure women feel on them to meet specific emotional demands, including being upbeat, encouraging and accommodating [9]. Digital literacy is ubiquitous in the society in which this research is conducted, yet information about its gendered consequences remains unaware [10]. This leaves women who cross such environments often to bear the psychological impact of such demands without a broader social appreciation of the challenges they face [11]. Thus, the paper is discussing a modern social trend with strong historical bases, placed at the intersection of feminist sociology and information technologies [12].

1.2. Research question

The study is dedicated to the primary problem of the emotional two-sidedness women experience on the Internet, which is supported by the popularity of social media and socialization of gender stereotypes [8]. This is a typical feature of the contradictory requirements imposed upon women who are not only encouraged to be real but also emotional and are also condemned to expressing the feelings that do not comply with stereotypically feminine standards, such as ambition or anger or intellectual aggressiveness [5]. This conflict forces women to cope with much tension in their daily lives on the internet [6]. The sense of this double bind, how it is managed and opposed is what we are going to explore. This research goes beyond posing whether there are gendered emotional norms on the Internet, and shifts towards a more subtle and detailed discussions of how they are enforced in the digital mediated world [3].

In order to explore this phenomenon in detail, the study is informed with the following focused questions:

1. How do young adult women perceive and interpret the unwritten societal rules for their emotional expression on popular social media platforms?
2. What specific strategies do these women consciously or unconsciously employ to manage their online emotional presentation to align with, or challenge, these perceived expectations?
3. What are the perceived social, psychological, and professional consequences for women who conform to, versus those who transgress, these gendered emotional norms in digital spaces?
4. By addressing these questions, the study aims to provide a detailed and empirically grounded account of the lived realities behind the performance of female identity online, contributing a critical perspective to our understanding of gender in the 21st century [13].

1.3. Purpose and significance of the research

This study is valuable to pursue as it deals with an urgent and understudied issue of contemporary social life with profound consequences of the well-being of each individual and social equality [10]. This study is intended to accomplish two things. First, it will attempt to empirically report and examine the emotional mechanisms of the emotional double bind specifically in the case of women on social media, which will offer a sociological language to describe an experience that is

commonly experienced individually but is systemic in nature [6]. Second, it strives to learn about the agency of the women in this regard, of how they are limited by norms and how they creatively make their way, challenge and subvert these norms [14]. In so doing, this research contributes to a higher level of understanding of how identities are constructed in the virtual realm and how gender inequality continues to exist in the digital realm [2].

This research is meaningful in several aspects. To the society, it provides insight into how digital spaces can be turned into platforms where destructive gender stereotypes are solidified, and this fits into a larger public and scholarly discussion of digital citizenship, online misogyny, and how internet spaces could be more equitable [12]. To the people, especially the young women who are the target group of this study, this study is a way of confirming their experiences and may help in shaping more critical views of the social forces that are influencing their online lives [1]. This work will address a gap that is very crucial in academic literature since the researcher will introduce theories of emotional labor, gender performativity, and dramaturgy into the digital sphere of sociology [7]. Finally, it has a benefit because it can be used to inform policy, system design, and educational efforts to create healthier and more inclusive digital spaces accessible to everyone of all genders [11].

2. Literature review

An exhaustive literature review should be systematic in a synthesis, narration, as well as evaluation of research done to establish gaps that a research proposes to fill [7]. Empirical studies of the gendered communication over the Internet, the social interpretation of online performance of digital identity, and the theoretical framework of gender and emotion are the three key pillars of this review.

2.1. Synthesis: theoretical foundations of gendered emotion

The basis of this study is a review of some of the important sociological theories. First, we will discuss the dramaturgical theory by Erving Goffman which asserts that social life can be likened to a theatrical performance whereby individuals are in control of their on-stage personality so as to ensure that they sustain the preferred impression [7]. The paradigm is quite useful when examining social media as it is a modern front stage through which individuals form their profile and interaction [2]. Then we use the theory of Gender performativity of Judith Butler that claims that gender is not an inherent characteristic, but instead a series of stylized and repetitive practices that create and sustain the sense of being a man or a woman [3]. One of the aspects of this performance is emotional expression; it is important to convey the correct feelings to make the society confirm that the gender identity is correct [6].

Finally, and, perhaps, the most important, we put into practice the concept of emotional labor offered by Arlie Russell Hochschild. This concept has been generalized by academics to touch upon the private life once it was initially applied to suggest the regulation of emotions in order to create a publicly visible facial and body expression at work [4; 14]. So that social harmony is maintained, that women provide support, and present a positive image that is non-threatening, this study, which compiled these theories into one, proposes that women are disproportionately required to regulate their emotional expression on the Internet [9]. This synthesis generates a unique theoretical perspective with which to analyze the pressures women are exposed to online. Incorporating these frameworks enables us to consider the social media as a vehicle of the compulsory expression of gendered emotion and a site of dialogue [5].

2.2. Narration: digital identity and online social dynamics

The body of literature available on digital sociology has compiled the effects of online space in the formation of identity and interaction in a systematic manner [1]. The initial studies were preoccupied with the fact that there was the possibility of anonymity on the Web in order to free people of the shackles of their real-life identities, to experiment with both gender and persona. Nevertheless, later scholarship has begun to look at how offline social organizations, such as gender hierarchies, are replicated, indeed intensified, in the digital space [12]. This literature tells a story of a shift towards more utopian conception of cyberspace into a more critical perspective of the latter as a disputed social domain. It has been demonstrated that social media sites with their focus on visual identity and ongoing social approval indicated by likes and comments challenge a greatly edited form of self-presentation that frequently conforms to traditional norms of attractiveness and behaviour [2].

Moreover, online communities studies have identified the high rate of gender-based harassment and behavior policing. Females, especially those who are vocal on feminist matters or those who work in male dominated internet platforms, indicate highly high levels of harassment [10,11]. This overview of the literature available shows that there is a distinct trend: although online resources allow people to express themselves in new ways, they are the places where the rule of patriarchy is actively implemented [6]. It is a story of a virtual world that reflects and, in some ways, exaggerates the effects of social pressure on women in real life, in a paradoxical condition of both possibility and danger [13]. This is important in explaining why the issue of the expression of emotions becomes such a high stakes and critical issue to women online.

2.3. Evaluation and identification of research gaps

Although the literature available has a solid approach, a critical review has shown that there are notable gaps that can be filled by this study [15]. First, the ideas of emotional labor and gender performativity are sufficiently developed, yet their implementation to the concrete architectural and social dynamics of the contemporary social media platforms remain a new trend of the study [8]. A lot of the literature on the topic of online harassment centers around the explicit acts of aggression, and not much attention is given to the more insidious nature of policing the emotional expression of women, the anger at them of being too emotional, too angry or too interested [5]. This paper has gone beyond open harassment to consider these micro-level governing practices.

Second, a lot of the research on the topic of digital identity either is too theoretical or is dedicated to one of the adverse effects, including cyberbullying. More qualitative, experience-based studies that look at the finer details of how women deal with these tricky emotional landscapes on day to day basis are in order [10]. The gap in the main research, then, is the deficiency in the combined sociological study of emotional double bind as a specific phenomenon of the digital era [6]. Previous research has briefly touched the elements of it individually, but the current project will be among the first to examine it in a comprehensive manner, merging theoretical understanding with the real-life experiences of women. This study will result in new knowledge in the interface of gender, technology, and emotion by addressing the strategies and implications of digital emotional management [9].

3. Research design

3.1. Research content

The structure of the content of this study will be based on three areas of analysis that are interrelated to answer the main research questions in the most effective way [16]. The former domain deals with normative perceptions. This will entail collecting information regarding the perceptions of participants on the explicit and tacit rules of emotion expression among women in websites such as Instagram and X [1]. Their understanding of the expectations of the audience, their perceptions of social feedback (for example, likes, comments, DMs), and their perceptions of what should or should not be taken as a normal or abnormal emotional expression by a female on the internet will be analyzed [8]. This will give a background idea of the normative environment that women live in.

The second point of analysis is focused on the emotional management strategies. In this case, the study will examine the particular practices and methods that women employ in managing their emotional selves on-line [5]. These are analyzing the usage of emojis and muted language to soften a critical opinion, the invention of private accounts (finstas) to be more authentic, or even not posting at all and abandoning some conversations altogether [6]. The idea is to develop a typology of these strategies, which are either focused on conformity, resistance or just survival in the digital space [11].

The third and last area of analysis is on perceived implications of these emotional performances. The research will explore the experiences of the participants, who have positive and negative outcomes [13]. This would involve the validation and communal backing to adhere to some emotional norms and the backlash, criticism, on-line harassment, or personal distress, incurred when violating them [10]. The joint consideration of these three areas of content will give the research a multi-dimensional image of the emotional double bind as an experience [2].

3.2. Research method

In this study, the research methodology to be used will be qualitative to provide insightful and contextualized information about the lived experiences of women in social media navigation [16,15]. To examine the nuance, subjectivity, and the multifaceted meanings people have of their social worlds, a qualitative methodology is best suited since it is impossible to sufficiently embrace these concepts using quantitative surveys. The main data collection tool will be semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which will be accompanied by the form of digital ethnography [7]. Such a mixed-qualitative method will allow gaining a deeper comprehension as self-reported experience will be complemented with the observational data concerning digital practices.

A group of 2025 females aged between 18-30 years that actively use at least two popular social media platforms (for example, Instagram, X, Tik Tok) will be used to conduct the research [10]. The purposive and snowball sampling methods will be used to recruit the participants based on university networks and spread out through referrals by the participants to be diverse in their experience. All the participants will be interviewed in a semi-structured interview that will last between 60 and 90 minutes through a video call to make it both accessible and comfortable [16]. The interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed word-to-word so that the analysis can be done. Open-ended questions will be used in the interviews and will be aimed at producing a detailed narrative regarding how people express emotions online, how they proceed to self-presentation, as well as how they consider the social responses they get.

To complement the interviews, there will be a digital aspect of the ethnographic component where participants will direct the researcher on the selected examples of their public or semi-public social media posts and provide an account of their decisions about captions, images, and the style of interaction [1]. This show-and-tell approach gives tangible illustrations on which to base the abstract discourses in the interviews. Anonymization of all data will be done to ensure that the confidentiality of the participants is not compromised. The analysis of data will be done through the thematic analysis approach which comprises a systematic identification, analysis and reporting of patterns (themes) in the data [16]. This stringent procedure will enable the creation of an empirically based theoretical insight of the digital emotional emotional cling.

4. Research plan

- Months 1-2: Finalize research proposal, obtain ethical board approval, and develop interview protocol and recruitment materials.
- Months 3-5: Participant recruitment and data collection. Conduct and transcribe all 20-25 semi-structured interviews.
- Months 6-8: Data analysis. Begin thematic analysis of interview transcripts, developing an initial coding framework and identifying emergent themes.
- Months 9-10: Writing of initial findings. Draft the literature review and methodology chapters and begin outlining the analysis chapters based on the developed themes.
- Months 11-12: Completion of the first full draft of the research paper, including the main body analysis and conclusion.
- Month 13: Revisions and finalization. Revise the draft based on feedback, proofread, and format the final manuscript for submission.

5. Conclusion

This paper recommends an urgent and critical analysis of the gendered relationships of emotional expression on social media. By focusing on the concept of the emotional double bind, the study will explore the manner in which women cope up with a complex digital space that constricts them by forcing them to conform to rigid gender expectations, and insists on their genuineness. The proposed qualitative approach will be able to capture the diverse and complex experience of young women and enable the deep understanding of the social and psychological impacts of their everyday digital self-presentation practices. The piece is important as it can be used to enhance our understanding of how gender inequality is reproduced in the digital age and at the same time highlight the agency and perseverance of women in such situations. Ultimately, the study is bound to contribute to the domains of sociology, gender studies, and communication studies and possibly assist in shaping wiser and fairer actions in this ever-more technologically developed society.

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