

## Intersectional Discrimination and Online Social Support between Cis-het and LGBTQIA+ Individuals

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** The purpose of the present study was to examine the differences in Intersectional Discrimination (InD) and Online Social Support (OSS) between cis-het and LGBTQIA+ individuals.

**Methodology:** A non-probability convenience sampling technique was used to draw a sample of 160 respondents from various parts of India. The Intersectional Discrimination Index [1] and Online Social Support Scale [2] were used to gather the data. It was hypothesized that there would be no significant differences in intersectional discrimination between cis-het and LGBTQIA+ individuals. It was also hypothesized that there would be no significant differences in online social support between cis-het and LGBTQIA+ individuals. Independent samples t-test was used to analyze the data.

**Results:** The results indicated that there were significant differences in all components of InD, whereas Social Companionship OSS and Informational OSS were found to be significantly different between cis-het and LGBTQIA+ individuals. No significant differences were found in Esteem/Emotional and Instrumental OSS between cis-het and LGBTQIA+ individuals. Implications and limitations of the study are discussed.

**Conclusion:** LGBTQIA+ individuals face a significantly higher level of intersectional discrimination as compared to their cis-het counterparts. Social Companionship Online Social Support and Informational Online Social Support were found to be higher in the LGBTQIA+ sample.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, discrimination, social support, social media, sexual and gender minorities.

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### INTRODUCTION

Regardless of “progressive” change, the present culture remains subject to patriarchal and biologically absolutist interpretations of sex, gender, and sexuality as fixed and binary [3-4]. Identity is the bedrock of all communities as it encompasses culture, beliefs, proclivity, and affinity, among other things and it is a critical variable in society, since it determines the distinctions between individuals or groups [5]. The fundamental nature of identities is both flexible and complicated, and while someone might emphasize, conceal or alter some elements of an individual’s identity, not all characteristics are subject to discretion [6].

#### Sex and Gender

The notion that individuals constitute of just two categories, i.e., males and females, has had a significant influence on the evolution of research in psychology [4]. “Sex” is biological in nature, whereas “gender” is a socio-cultural construct, having psychological and behavioural features and/or patterns, which is why the concept of gender can differ in different contexts and can evolve over time [7-9] i.e., it is dynamic in nature. The understanding of gender is equivocal, and when it is perceived to be synonymous with sex, especially in research, the only information available is the participant's sex [7]. The binary of sex and gender is prominent in the popular aspects of neuroscience [4]. Using the terms sex and gender interchangeably in both clinical and research-related settings is very prevalent, even in present times. Since there is no clear

demarcation or understanding, and/or acknowledgement of how these two terms are different, it helps perpetuate the female-male binary, which might cause biases in various settings. In contemporary times, substantial objections to the notion of the gender binary have emerged from academicians and activists alike [4].

### **Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity**

An enduring pattern of romantic and/or sexual and/or emotional attraction to the same gender, opposite gender, or both, or any other gender(s), and usually conceptualized as gay, lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual, pansexual, etc. can be described as sexual orientation [10-11]. How an individual understands and describes their own gender is known as their gender identity [10, 12-13].

### **Intersectionality**

Coined by Crenshaw in 1989, Intersectionality is a theoretical model which helps us understand how different facets of a person's social and political identities interact to create diverse modes of discrimination and advantage [14]. Distinct kinds of subjugation are produced in relation to various social identities of an individual, and though early work on intersectionality focused on the unique situation of black women in relation to both black men and white women, the term has subsequently been developed to cover a variety of social identities [15]. Instead of disregarding the disparities that do exist, or downplaying their probable effect on the alliance between the clinician and the patient, intersectionality recognises how this connection is shaped by multidimensional differences, which in turn might redefine the alliance and result in enhanced outcomes [15]. Researchers can be held responsible and new knowledge can be generated to facilitate accessibility of, and equality in healthcare with the help of the framework of intersectionality [16].

### **Discrimination and Othering**

Discrimination can be described as the “policies, practices, and behaviors that perpetuate inequities between socially-defined groups” [1, 17]. Communities usually characterize themselves in reference to others, i.e., social identities are relational, which is because identification has no significance without the ‘other’ [18]. As Debnath describes it, the counterpart of the ‘self’ is the ‘other’ (i.e., marginalized groups who are placed at the periphery of the systemic structure) and the construction of this otherness/othering takes place only when groups are classified into two categories: ‘them’ (other/out-group) and ‘us’ (self/in-group). Othering is not a novel occurrence and is an outcome of social exclusion [5].

### **Intersectional Discrimination**

Previously, very limited research has directly examined discrimination based on the intersection of various social identities [19-20]. Experiences of communities encountering different types of discrimination at the intersection of identities might be very unclear and inaccurate if one type of discrimination is studied exclusively at any given point in time, because inequalities in healthcare do not necessarily rise linearly with each additional marginalized social identity [21-22].

As depicted by Atrey, “[intersectionality] can be imagined in terms of the qualities of a Venn diagram such that the portion where the spheres intersect represents some unique features of its own, and also shares some features of the individual spheres” [24]. The discrimination that arises at the intersection of marginalized social identities is described as intersectional discrimination [1, 24].

### **Online Social Support**

Online social support comprises of online support satisfaction, i.e., to what extent people feel satisfied with the support received from interactions on social networking sites and online support frequency, i.e., how often people receive emotional, tangible, and informational support online [25].

### **Need of the Study**

India is a country with diverse populations, multiple social identities, and power structures. Yet, the framework of intersectionality has not yet been employed properly in research in the Indian context. The past decade has been pivotal for the LGBTQIA+ community in India and it is crucial that research related

to the community be intersectional and inclusive [26]. Additionally, with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone's lives have moved online for the past couple of years. And with this sudden, significant shift of lifestyle, the way we look at things, the way we interact with ourselves and others, and the way we support each other also changed. Therefore, social issues related to the LGBTQIA+ communities should be studied under an intersectional lens in the Indian context. While social support would have been relevant in the pre-COVID era, online social support (i.e., social support obtained virtually/digitally) seems to be of more significance in the present times.

This study strives to investigate discrimination and online social support at the intersection of gender and sexual identities of individuals.

### Research Gap

The available literature was reviewed and it was found that there is a severe lack of research under the lens of intersectionality – and LGBTQIA+ identities in general – in the Indian context. This study is an endeavour to start bridging this massive gap in terms of representation of gender and sexual minority groups in the Indian context by attempting to be inclusive, and to explore the types of discrimination experienced by people at the intersection of these identities.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

An embedded research design was used in the study. The study followed a quantitative approach. The present study aimed at assessing the differences in Intersectional Discrimination and Online Social Support between cis-het and LGBTQIA+ populations. To assess the differences between the populations, Independent Samples t-test was used to analyze the data.

### Objectives of the Study

- To assess the difference in Intersectional Discrimination between cis-het and LGBTQIA+ individuals.
- To assess the difference in Online Social Support between cis-het and LGBTQIA+ individuals.

### Hypotheses

- H<sub>01</sub>: There is no significant difference in intersectional discrimination between cis-het and LGBTQIA+ individuals.
- H<sub>02</sub>: There is no significant difference in online social support between cis-het and LGBTQIA+ individuals.

### Variables

The variables of the study were Intersectional Discrimination, which includes the components anticipated discrimination; day-to-day discrimination (past year and lifetime); major discrimination (past year and lifetime), and Online Social Support which includes esteem/emotional online social support; social companionship online social support; informational online social support; instrumental online social support.

### Demographic Variables

Demographic variables such as age, nationality, current state of residence, gender identity and sexual orientation were collected.

### Sample Distribution

The sample size was 160. Based on gender identity, the sample consisted of cis women respondents (N=87); cis men respondents (N=64); non-binary respondents (N=5); a gender non-conforming respondent (N=1); a gender fluid respondent (N=1); an agender respondent (N=1); a questioning respondent (N=1). Based on sexual orientation, the sample consisted of heterosexual respondents (N=80) and bisexual respondents

(N=26); gay respondents (N=23); pansexual respondents (N=16); asexual respondents (N=6); lesbian respondents (N=5); queer respondents (N=2); demisexual respondents (N=2). If at least one of the individual's identities (either gender identity or sexual orientation) is not cisgender and/or heterosexual respectively, the individual was included in the LGBTQIA+ sample.

### Sampling Techniques

A non-probability sampling method was employed to collect the desired sample size using convenience sampling technique. The sample of the study consists of cis-gender, heterosexual, and LGBTQIA+ individuals in the age group of 18 to 40 years. The data was collected through Google Forms, wherein each participant was provided with an informed consent form before the demographic details.

### Research Ethics

All research ethics were followed. Honesty and confidentiality were ensured. The electronic informed consent was taken before the participant could move on to filling in demographic details and the rest of the questionnaire.

### Tools Used for the Study

- **The Intersectional Discrimination Index (InDI):** The Intersectional Discrimination Index (InDI) measures developed by Scheim and Bauer [1] include the 9-item Intersectional Anticipated Discrimination Scale (InDI-A), the 9-item Intersectional Day-to-day Discrimination Index (InDI-D), and the 13-item Intersectional Major Discrimination Index (InDI-M). The adjusted Intraclass Correlation Coefficients (ICC) for test-retest reliability of the InDI-A, the lifetime InDI-D, and the InDI-M frequencies are 0.72, 0.70, and 0.72 respectively. All of these components InDI measures have demonstrated strong construct validity [1].
- **The Online Social Support Scale (OSSS):** The Online Social Support Scale (OSSS) developed by Nick and others [2], consists of two parts, wherein the first section includes a list of social media platforms and other online sites, services, and apps, such as dating apps, gaming apps, etc. (some of the apps in this list were deleted, in view of the author's suggestion that researchers should update the list depending on the popularity/availability of platforms at the time of the research being conducted). The respondent is supposed to rate from 0 to 4 for each app, depending on how much they use these platforms to connect and interact with other people, with 0 being 'never' and 4 being 'a lot'. The second part of the scale is a 40 item questionnaire. The respondents are expected to rate how often the listed things have happened for them while they interacted with others online over the last two months with 0 being 'never' and 4 being 'a lot'. This questionnaire has 4 sub-scales, namely, Esteem/Emotional online social support (items 1-10); Social Companionship online social support (items 11-20); Informational online social support (items 21-30); Instrumental online social support (items 31-40). The total online social support can be calculated by summing up the scores of items 1-40. Coefficient alphas for the 10-item OSSS subscales are 0.95 for Esteem/Emotional Support, 0.94 for Social Companionship, 0.95 for Informational Support, and 0.95 for Instrumental Support. The scale has adequate convergent and discriminant validity [2].

### Statistical Analysis

The data was analyzed using the software SPSS. Descriptive statistics such as Mean and Standard Deviation were calculated. For inferential statistics, independent samples t-test was used to assess the differences in the components of Intersectional Discrimination and the sub-scales of Online Social Support between both populations.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to assess the difference in Intersectional Discrimination and Online Social Support between Cis-het and LGBTQIA+ individuals. To assess the differences, independent samples t-test was used. Normality testing was not done because it was claimed that violations of normality would not be likely

to jeopardize scientific findings [27-28]. The data obtained in psychological investigations rarely, if ever, meet the requirements of normally distributed data [29-32].

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Components of Intersectional Discrimination and Subscales of Online Social Support among Cis-het Individuals**

Item	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Intersectional Anticipated Discrimination	0.00	3.00	1.14	0.74
Intersectional Lifetime Day-to-day Discrimination	0	9	3.88	3.09
Intersectional Past Year Day-to-day Discrimination	0	18	3.25	4.00
Intersectional Lifetime Major Discrimination	0	13	2.26	3.16
Intersectional Past Year Major Discrimination	0	8	0.51	1.35
Esteem/Emotional Online Social Support	0	40	20.74	9.32
Social Companionship Online Social Support	0	39	18.79	10.64
Informational Online Social Support	0	40	18.64	10.59
Instrumental Online Social Support	0	40	15.14	11.18

Note. N=80

Table 1 indicates the descriptive statistics for all five components of Intersectional Discrimination (InD) among the Cis-het sample (N=80), i.e., Intersectional Anticipated Discrimination (M=1.14; SD=0.74), Intersectional Lifetime Day-to-day Discrimination (M=3.88; SD=3.09), Intersectional Past Year Day-to-day Discrimination (M=3.25; SD=4.00), Intersectional Lifetime Major Discrimination (M=2.26; SD=3.16), and Intersectional Past Year Major Discrimination (M=0.51; SD=1.35). Table 1 also indicates the descriptive statistics of the four sub-scales of Online Social Support (OSS) among the same Cis-het sample (N=80), i.e., Esteem/Emotional Online Social Support (M=20.74; SD=9.32), Social Companionship Online Social Support (M=18.79; SD=10.64), Informational Online Social Support (M=18.64; SD=10.59), and Instrumental Online Social Support (M=15.14; SD=11.18).

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Components of Intersectional Discrimination and Subscales of Online Social Support among LGBTQIA+ Individuals**

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Intersectional Anticipated Discrimination	0.55	3.00	2.04	0.68
Intersectional Lifetime Day-to-day Discrimination	0	9	6.36	2.64
Intersectional Past Year Day-to-day Discrimination	0	18	7.26	5.44
Intersectional Lifetime Major Discrimination	0	15	5.04	4.12
Intersectional Past Year Major Discrimination	0	6	1.34	1.72
Esteem/Emotional Online Social Support	0	40	23.34	10.26
Social Companionship Online Social Support	0	40	22.53	10.72
Informational Online Social Support	0	40	23.16	10.58
Instrumental Online Social Support	0	40	14.50	10.98

Note. N=80

Table 2 indicates the descriptive statistics for all five components of InD among the LGBTQIA+ sample (N=80), i.e., Intersectional Anticipated Discrimination (M=2.04; SD=0.68), Intersectional Lifetime Day-to-

day Discrimination (M=6.36; SD=2.64), Intersectional Past Year Day-to-day Discrimination (M=7.26; SD=5.44), Intersectional Lifetime Major Discrimination (M=5.04; SD=4.12), and Intersectional Past Year Major Discrimination (M=1.34; SD=1.72). Table 2 also indicates the descriptive statistics of the four sub-scales of OSS among the same LGBTQIA+ sample (N=80), i.e., Esteem/Emotional Online Social Support (M=23.34; SD=10.26), Social Companionship Online Social Support (M=22.53; SD=10.72), Informational Online Social Support (M=23.16; SD=10.58), and Instrumental Online Social Support (M=14.50; SD=10.98).

**Table 3: Independent Samples t-test for Components of Intersectional Discrimination between Cis-het and LGBTQIA+ Individuals**

Items	Cis-het Individuals		LGBTQIA+ Individuals		t	Mean Diff.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Intersectional Anticipated Discrimination	1.14	0.74	2.04	0.68	7.96**	-0.90
Intersectional Lifetime Day-to-day Discrimination	3.88	3.09	6.36	2.64	5.46**	-2.48
Intersectional Past Year Day-to-day Discrimination	3.25	4.00	7.26	5.44	5.30**	-4.01
Intersectional Major Lifetime Discrimination	2.26	3.16	5.04	4.12	4.77**	-2.77
Intersectional Major Past Year Discrimination	0.51	1.35	1.34	1.72	3.37**	-0.82

\*\*p < .001

Table 3 shows the results of independent samples t-test of the five components of InD between the cis-het and LGBTQIA+ samples. As the table indicates, the mean difference (MD) in Intersectional Anticipated Discrimination between both the samples is -0.90 (t=7.96); the MD in Intersectional Lifetime Day-to-day Discrimination is -2.48 (t=-5.46); the MD in Intersectional Past Year Day-to-day Discrimination is -4.01 (t=-5.30); the MD in Intersectional Major Lifetime Discrimination is -2.77 (t=-4.77); and the MD in Intersectional Major Past Year Discrimination is -0.82 (t=-3.37). It was hypothesized that there would be no significant difference in InD between cis-het and LGBTQIA+ individuals. This null hypothesis is rejected. As the results indicated, Intersectional Anticipated Discrimination, Intersectional Day-to-day Discrimination (Lifetime and Past Year), and Intersectional Major Discrimination (Lifetime and Past Year) were all significantly higher among LGBTQIA+ individuals, when compared with their cis-het counterparts (the means of all components of InD being much higher in the LGBTQIA+ sample).

**Table 4: Independent Samples t-test for Sub-scales of Online Social Support between Cis-het and LGBTQIA+ Individuals**

Items	Cis-het Individuals		LGBTQIA+ Individuals		t	Mean Diff.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Esteem/Emotional Online Social Support	20.74	9.32	23.34	10.26	1.67	-2.60
Social Companionship Online Social Support	18.79	10.64	22.53	10.72	2.21*	-3.73
Informational Online Social Support	18.64	10.59	23.16	10.58	2.70*	-4.52
Instrumental Online Social Support	15.14	11.18	14.50	10.98	0.36	0.63

\*p < 0.05

Table 4 shows the results of independent samples t-test of the four sub-scales of OSS between the cis-het and LGBTQIA+ samples. As the table indicates, the MD in Esteem/Emotional OSS between both the samples is -2.60 ( $t=-1.67$ ); the MD in Social Companionship OSS is -3.73 ( $t=-2.21$ ); the MD in Informational OSS is -4.52 ( $t=-2.70$ ); and the MD in Instrumental OSS is 0.63 ( $t=-0.36$ ).

It was also hypothesized that there would be no significant difference in the four sub-scales of OSS between cis-het and LGBTQIA+ individuals. This null hypothesis is accepted for Esteem/Emotional Online Social Support and Instrumental Online Social Support, as there was no significant difference between these two sub-scales of OSS. However, this null hypothesis is rejected for the other two sub-scales of OSS, as the results indicated that Social Companionship Online Social Support and Informational Online Social Support were significantly higher among the LGBTQIA+ sample.

This finding could be explained by a study conducted in 2015, in which the results indicated that the LGBTQIA+ youth were more likely than their cis-het counterparts to have online friends, and to evaluate these friends as better than their in-person friends at providing emotional support [33].

## CONCLUSION

LGBTQIA+ individuals face a significantly higher level of intersectional discrimination as compared to their cis-het counterparts. Social Companionship Online Social Support and Informational Online Social Support were found to be higher in the LGBTQIA+ sample.

### Implications

The results obtained from this study have various theoretical and practical implications. The findings fall in line with the Minority Stress Theory [34-35] and help us understand anticipated and day-to-day discrimination when it comes to LGBTQIA+ individuals. This study can be used to increase awareness about the prevalence of anti-LGBTQIA+ discrimination. The statistics of anticipated discrimination can be used to come up with solutions in order to create safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ individuals, be it in counselling and psychotherapy, or schools and colleges, or in any other relevant social settings. Results pertaining to day-to-day discrimination or major discrimination can be used in relation to policies in terms of housing, physical and mental healthcare, and workplace inclusion. Online social support can be used as a tool to assist individuals with self-esteem, emotional support and finding and allocating mental health and other resources.

### Limitations of the Study and Scope for Future Research

Despite much planning and effort, the study is not free of limitations. The size of each of the samples was less. Another limitation of the study is that it looked at the LGBTQIA+ sample as one population. Future research could include replication of the study and analysis of the different sub-categories/labels or the expansion of this study by including an intervention.

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