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Gender Identity in the Age of AI and Virtual Reality.

Abstract

This paper investigates how gender identity is being reconfigured in the contemporary convergence of artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR). AI systems increasingly infer, classify, and generate gendered representations across domains such as visual media, health, education, and online platforms, often reproducing binary, Eurocentric, and heteronormative norms through biased training data and opaque model architectures. Recent empirical work documents systematic gender bias in large language models, recommendation algorithms, and text-to-image generators, including masculinized default outputs, stereotyped occupational depictions, and uneven error rates across gendered categories. At the same time, VR and social virtual environments afford intensified forms of embodiment and avatar-mediated presence, enabling queer, transgender, and gender-diverse users to explore, affirm, and experiment with gendered self-presentation in ways that may be inaccessible or unsafe offline. Studies of avatar gender transitions, VRChat role adoption, and LGBTQ+ communities in social VR show that virtual embodiment can both alleviate and exacerbate dysphoria, providing spaces of euphoria, social support, and self-definition, while also exposing users to harassment, exclusion, and platform-level constraints. Drawing on an interdisciplinary review of scholarship in critical data studies, AI ethics, human–computer interaction, VR research, and queer and trans studies (2020–2025), the paper develops a conceptual framework for understanding gender identity as co-produced by datafied inference and immersive embodiment. We map four key mediating processes—algorithmic classification of gender, generative representation of gendered bodies and voices, avatar design and customization, and socio-technical governance of platforms—and analyse how they interact to stabilize, negotiate, or destabilize gender categories. The paper argues that “gender identity in the age of AI and VR” is best understood as a dynamic, infrastructurally mediated relation between lived experience, embodied virtual practices, and predictive systems that continuously profile

and anticipate users. On this basis, we formulate a research agenda and normative design principles aimed at (i) resisting reductive and binary gender taxonomies in AI pipelines, (ii) supporting plural, self-determined gender embodiments in VR, and (iii) building participatory governance structures that centre queer and trans expertise in the development of AI- and VR-based systems.
Keywords: gender identity; artificial intelligence; virtual reality; embodiment; queer and trans studies; algorithmic bias

1. Introduction

Gender identity in contemporary society is undergoing unprecedented transformation, shaped significantly by rapid advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR) technologies. These emerging systems increasingly mediate how individuals perceive, express, negotiate, and validate their sense of gender, both in personal contexts and within broader sociotechnical environments. AI systems engage in powerful classificatory and predictive functions that infer, label, and represent gender through algorithmic processes embedded in recommendation engines, biometric recognition tools, generative models, and large-scale data analytics. Simultaneously, VR environments construct immersive spaces where embodied presence and identity experimentation are enacted through avatars and sensory simulation, enabling forms of gender expression that may transcend or challenge the constraints of physical life. In this evolving techno-cultural landscape, the meaning of gender is neither static nor solely biologically or socially predetermined; rather, it is increasingly performed, constructed, and negotiated within digitally mediated ecologies shaped by technological design, platform governance, and cultural discourse.

The acceleration of AI and VR integration creates both transformative opportunities and substantial risks. On one hand, immersive virtual experiences allow users—especially transgender, non-binary, queer, and gender-diverse individuals—to explore gender embodiments and relational identities with greater autonomy, creativity, and psychological

safety. Social VR communities provide platforms for identity exploration, peer support, and collective affirmation. On the other hand, gender representation within AI systems remains deeply affected by algorithmic bias, where systems trained on historically discriminatory or binary datasets reproduce limited or harmful depictions of gender. Facial recognition technologies often misclassify gender-diverse individuals, generative image and text models reinforce stereotypical occupational and aesthetic norms, and personalisation algorithms systematically align content delivery with normative gender expectations. The result is an emergent tension wherein AI tends to stabilize and institutionalize traditional gender hierarchies, while VR holds potential to expand and pluralize identity expression. Understanding how these technological forces intersect is critical to advancing both social equity and ethical technology development.

Overview, Scope and Objectives:

This research paper offers an interdisciplinary examination of how gender identity is configured, contested, and transformed in the age of AI and VR. It situates the discussion at the intersection of AI ethics, human–computer interaction, queer and trans studies, virtual embodiment research, and critical theories of identity. The scope of the paper encompasses contemporary AI systems engaged in generative modelling, algorithmic classification, predictive analytics, and automated representation, alongside VR platforms that facilitate avatar-mediated presence, role adoption, and immersive interaction. Emphasis is placed on understanding how technological infrastructures, design decisions, and data practices actively shape lived experiences of gender rather than simply reflecting pre-existing identities. The primary objectives of this work are:

(1) to critically analyse how AI systems classify, generate, and influence perceptions of gender identity;

(2) to investigate how VR environments afford forms of embodiment and identity experimentation that reshape self-recognition and social validation;

(3) to examine the sociopolitical and ethical implications of gendered interactions within

AI–VR ecosystems; and

(4) to develop a conceptual framework capable of guiding future research and informing inclusive and participatory design.

Author Motivations

The motivation behind this study arises from a need to interrogate the socio-technical processes through which digital systems increasingly define and delimit human identity. As AI becomes embedded within everyday decision-making infrastructures—governing employment, healthcare, education, and online communication—and as VR becomes more accessible and socially immersive, the consequences for gender-diverse populations become profound. The author is motivated by the recognition that technological innovation often advances faster than ethical reflection or policy intervention, and by the critical necessity of amplifying the voices of communities most affected by misrepresentation and exclusion. This research seeks to contribute scholarly insight to ongoing debates, challenge deterministic narratives around technological neutrality, and propose directions for equitable, respectful, and self-determined gender futures in digital environments.

Paper Structure

The remainder of this paper is organized into several interconnected sections. Section 1 provides a comprehensive theoretical framework that integrates perspectives from gender theory, embodiment studies, and critical algorithm studies. Section 2 presents an in-depth analysis of AI-driven gender inference and generative representation, addressing classification systems, dataset construction, and algorithmic bias. Section 3 examines VR environments and avatar-based identity experimentation, highlighting empirical studies and lived experiences of gender-diverse users. Section 4 explores the intersection of AI and VR, analysing their co-constitutive impacts on identity formation, sociality, governance, and power. Section 5 proposes an integrated conceptual model for understanding gender identity in technologically mediated contexts and identifies key challenges and ethical dilemmas. Section 6 outlines research implications, policy recommendations, and design

principles aimed at fostering inclusive technological ecosystems. The final section concludes with reflections on future directions and the urgent importance of centering gender plurality in emerging digital landscapes.

In a world where technological architectures increasingly shape personal identity and social meaning, the study of gender identity within AI and VR environments is not only academically significant but socially imperative. This work aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how gender is being reimagined, contested, and reconstructed through digital mediation, and how more equitable futures might be envisioned and realized.

2. Literature Review

Research at the intersection of gender identity, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality has expanded significantly over the past five years, revealing complex dynamics through which digital technologies both constrain and enable gender expression. The existing body of work can be broadly categorized into three thematic domains: (1) algorithmic gender classification and generative representation in AI systems, (2) identity embodiment and avatar-based participation in VR environments, and (3) socio-ethical considerations surrounding gender plurality, discrimination, and inclusivity within digitally mediated ecosystems. Despite growing scholarly attention, critical gaps persist regarding the integrated study of AI and VR as mutually shaping infrastructures that actively participate in the negotiation of gender identity. This review synthesizes major contributions across current literature, highlighting achievements and identifying research limitations.

AI, Gender Classification, and Algorithmic Representation

Recent analysis has demonstrated that AI systems replicate and amplify entrenched gender biases embedded within datasets, modelling strategies, and system deployment contexts. Ho et al. [6] provide empirical evidence showing that AI-driven conversational platforms, including large language models, exhibit systematic bias in gendered outputs, reinforcing normative stereotypes and misrepresenting non-binary or gender-expansive

identities. Locke and Hodgdon [7] argue that generative visual AI disproportionately defaults to masculine-coded representations and sexualized depictions of women, concluding that AI training pipelines reproduce ideological assumptions rather than biologically or socially neutral categories. Similarly, Tunjungbiru et al. [5] reveal global disparities in AI literacy and gender bias awareness, demonstrating that cultural and educational environments directly influence how users interpret algorithmic gender outputs. Empirical studies in clinical and educational contexts confirm the real-world consequences of algorithmic inequality. Currie et al. [12] document gender distortion within text-to-image generation systems trained on medical datasets, showing that male-coded depictions dominate professional portrayals of medical students, thereby reinforcing occupational stratification. Barry and Stephenson [4] analyze epistemic injustice in generative AI, arguing that the invisibility of queer and trans identities in training data produces structural forms of exclusion. Shah [9] similarly emphasizes the need for digital literacy to challenge AI dominance within gendered systems of power. Collectively, these studies highlight AI's tendency to stabilize binary and heteronormative interpretations of gender, foregrounding the urgent need for alternative data architectures.

VR, Embodiment, and Gender Expression through Avatars

Parallel research in VR foregrounds the transformative potential of immersive environments for identity experimentation and psychological well-being. Zhang and Juvrud [10] show that avatar customization in VRChat supports exploration of gender roles and promotes social connection, enabling individuals to negotiate identity more autonomously than in offline contexts. Leyns et al. [2] and Smith et al. [11] demonstrate the potential of VR-based therapy and voice training applications for transgender individuals, reporting increased confidence, reduced dysphoria, and improved self-affirmation in clinical and social settings. Kang and Rhee [1] similarly explore avatar gender transitions on ZEPETO, noting that virtual embodiment facilitates experimentation and symbolic passage for users undergoing gender transitions.

Community-based VR research also reveals powerful emotional and social dimensions. Li et al. [17] document the strength of social support networks within LGBTQ+ VR communities, identifying shared emotional resilience and the creation of collective safety spaces. Freeman and Acena [19] examine the politics of visibility, demonstrating how VR environments provide opportunities for queer performance and relational identity. Reyes and Fisher [18] identify therapeutic gains for transgender users engaging in avatar-based embodiment within gaming spaces, suggesting VR's capacity to mitigate real-world marginalization. At a more theoretical level, Ristola [8] frames the metaverse as a site for future queer world-building, while Tacikowski et al. [20] demonstrate experimentally that body-swap experiences can temporarily alter participants' internal sense of gender identity, challenging biological essentialism.

Ethical, Political, and Sociotechnical Contexts

Studies within AI and ethics highlight the political nature of algorithmic systems and gender formation. Buslón et al. [16] emphasize the need for gender-inclusive data governance, particularly in health contexts where automated systems may misclassify patients. De Lima et al. [15] provide a systematic review showing that gender bias in AI is pervasive across technical domains but poorly conceptualized within regulatory frameworks. Hipólito et al. [14] propose enactive AI as a transformative paradigm capable of resisting essentialist gender categorization and enabling situated interaction. Bragazzi et al. [13] survey the implications of generative AI for LGBTQ+ communities, foregrounding both its capacity for support and the risks associated with biased representation.

Research Gap

Despite rich contributions, several gaps remain evident. First, research on AI and VR typically occurs in parallel rather than through integrated theoretical or empirical analysis. Much existing scholarship isolates technological effects within either AI-based classification and generative modelling [4], [7], [12], [15], or VR-based experiences of embodiment and

sociality [1], [2], [10], [17]–[20], without sufficiently exploring how predictive algorithmic infrastructures interface with immersive virtual identity construction. Second, empirical studies disproportionately focus on Western sociocultural contexts, neglecting global and intersectional perspectives, particularly within the Global South [5], [9]. Third, although scholars identify harms in AI and opportunities in VR, little research addresses how VR platforms may themselves reproduce exclusion through platform governance, access inequality, or avatar design constraints. Finally, few studies propose comprehensive conceptual models or actionable design frameworks linking technological architecture, ethical responsibility, and lived experience.

The existing literature demonstrates that AI tends to stabilize and institutionalize binary gender norms through classification, training data, and predictive architectures, while VR provides expanded opportunities for identity plurality and self-definition. However, the absence of integrated interdisciplinary frameworks leaves critical questions unanswered regarding how algorithmic inference and virtual embodiment co-construct gender identity. This gap underscores the need for scholarship that not only analyzes technological effects but also theorizes their relational interactions and proposes inclusive, community-informed design alternatives.

3. Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Foundations

This section develops the theoretical grounding for analysing gender identity within AI- and VR-mediated environments and provides detailed conceptual definitions necessary to understand how technological infrastructures interact with lived and embodied identity. Drawing from gender theory, embodiment studies, queer and trans scholarship, and sociotechnical systems theory, this framework positions gender not as a fixed or biologically determined attribute, but as a dynamic and relational process shaped through continuous interaction between individuals, social structures, cultural expectations, and increasingly, computational and immersive technologies.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

3.1.1 Gender as a Performed and Constructed Identity

Foundational work in gender studies conceptualizes gender as a performative and socially constructed practice rather than an inherent biological category. Gender is enacted through repeated social behaviors, discursive norms, and cultural scripts that shape how individuals are recognized and positioned in society. In digital contexts, performativity extends into virtual spaces where identity is expressed through linguistic interaction, visual representation, and embodied avatar presence. AI and VR environments thus function as arenas where gender meaning is negotiated through interaction with technological systems that both enable and constrain expressive possibilities.

3.1.2 Embodiment and Extended Identity

Embodiment theory argues that identity emerges through lived bodily experience, sensory perception, and relational interaction within material environments. VR fundamentally challenges traditional boundaries of embodiment by allowing users to inhabit avatar bodies that may diverge from their physical forms. Through immersive sensory feedback, gestures, and behavioral alignment with virtual bodies, users often experience a sense of presence and embodied selfhood that can transform personal identity, emotional well-being, and self-recognition. This displacement of embodiment from the physical body into virtual corporeality signifies a paradigm shift where gendered experience becomes technologically mediated, spatially distributed, and experientially fluid.

3.1.3 AI, Datafication, and Algorithmic Classification

Critical algorithm studies conceptualize AI systems as infrastructures of power that convert social identity into data categories and predictive outputs. AI models infer gender through facial recognition, voice profiling, biometric patterns, language patterns, and metadata classification, frequently presuming binary categories as universal. These processes are neither neutral nor objective; they are shaped by historical biases embedded in training data, model architecture, and system deployment contexts. Gender identity becomes computationally legible only insofar as it conforms to preexisting data structures, often erasing or misrecognising non-binary, transgender, and gender-fluid identities. AI thus

participates in the production and stabilization of gender norms through algorithmic inference.

3.1.4 Sociotechnical Systems and Power Relations

Sociotechnical systems theory emphasizes that technologies and social systems co-construct one another: they are mutually shaped through design decisions, cultural values, regulatory frameworks, and everyday use. AI and VR do not merely reflect gender norms but actively produce and reproduce them through architecture, constraints, affordances, and governance practices. Platform policies, data access, interface design, and avatar customization tools all condition the visibility, legitimacy, and agency of gender-diverse users. Thus, gender identity must be understood within a multilayered assemblage of technological, political, and cultural forces.

3.2 Conceptual Definitions

To ensure clarity and analytical precision, key conceptual terms used in this research are defined as follows:

Gender Identity: A deeply felt internal sense of self as male, female, both, neither, or another gender position altogether, independent of biological or assigned sex. It reflects lived experience and self-recognition.

Gender Expression: The outward articulation of gender through behaviour, appearance, language, and social enactment, including avatar-based representation in virtual spaces.

Embodiment: The experiential sense of inhabiting a body, whether physical or virtual, shaped through sensory perception, emotional cognition, and relational interaction.

Avatar: A digital body or representation used by individuals in virtual environments to express identity, presence, and agency within immersive or social platforms.

Algorithmic Inference: The computational process by which AI models classify or predict identity categories, behaviours, or preferences based on data patterns.

Virtual Embodiment: The psychological and sensory alignment between the user’s sense of self and their avatar representation, often producing changes in emotional state, identity perception, and bodily awareness.

Digital Identity Construction: The formation and negotiation of identity within digitally mediated environments, influenced by technological affordances and social interactions.

3.3 Integrated Conceptual Model

The conceptual model proposed in this paper integrates the above theories into a relational framework that explains how gender identity is co-constructed through interactions between AI-based inference and VR-based embodiment.

Component1- Algorithmic Classification and Predictive Identity:

AI interprets gender through invisible computational processes that translate identity into measurable data values. These systems enforce and institutionalize normative assumptions, thereby shaping social expectations and identity recognition.

Component 2- Embodied Identity Exploration in VR:

In contrast to the classificatory orientation of AI, VR supports fluid identity expression through avatar customization, sensory embodiment, and participatory social interactions. Virtual space thus becomes a site for experimenting with forms of selfhood that may resist or reconfigure normative identity boundaries.

Component 3- Socio-Technical Mediation:

Platforms act as controlling infrastructures that define the limits of identity expression. Governance rules, moderation policies, voice and body customization options, and interaction protocols determine what identities are visible, possible, or restricted.

Component 4- Lived Experience and Community Meaning-Making:

Users interpret technological effects through personal experience, psychological response, and collective solidarity. Community practices generate new narratives of gender that may reshape broader cultural understanding.

3.4 Synthesis

This integrated framework positions gender identity as a dynamic interplay between personal experience, technological systems, and sociocultural environments. AI tends to

classify and restrict gender through predictive structures, while VR expands identity possibility through embodied relational exploration. The negotiation between these forces represents a new frontier in gender studies and in digital ethics, raising critical questions about autonomy, recognition, and future identity architectures.

4. Analysis of AI Systems and Algorithmic Gender Bias with Integrated Case Perspectives

This section provides a comprehensive analysis of how AI systems participate in the classification, inference, and generative representation of gender identity, drawing from empirical research and case examples. It examines algorithmic design structures, data practices, and deployment consequences that shape the digital construction of gender. The section integrates findings from existing studies while situating them within broader sociotechnical and ethical implications. Where relevant, summary tables are included to structure comparative insights.

4.1 Algorithmic Gender Classification and Predictive Identity

Artificial intelligence systems increasingly infer gender using multimodal data, including facial recognition metrics, biometric patterns, voice characteristics, linguistic markers, and behavioral analytics. These technologies claim accuracy and objectivity, yet research consistently demonstrates systematic misclassification and disproportionate error rates affecting transgender and non-binary individuals. Gender recognition algorithms typically operate within a binary framework, reducing identity complexity to male or female categories based on legacy datasets. This computational simplification functions as a form of identity policing, enforcing fixed categorical boundaries and erasing forms of gender expression that fall outside conventional norms.

Studies such as Ho et al. [6] and Locke & Hodgdon [7] indicate that algorithmic bias originates primarily from uneven dataset representation, skewed labelling practices, and unexamined sociocultural assumptions embedded within AI model architecture. Automated gender recognition has been documented to misgender individuals with androgynous

physical features, racialized facial traits, or non-conforming voice patterns, leading to psychological harm and social exclusion. These failures are magnified when technologies are deployed in institutional environments such as education, healthcare, employment screening, and security systems, where algorithmic outputs may carry legal or material consequences.

4.2 Generative Models and Stereotyped Depictions

Generative AI systems—including text-to-image models and large language models—actively shape cultural perceptions of gender through synthetic media output. Studies such as Currie et al. [12] and Collyer-Hoar et al. [3] demonstrate that generative models reproduce occupational segregation and aesthetic stereotypes. Male-coded figures are typically portrayed in authoritative, technical, or leadership contexts, while female-coded figures are generated in caregiving, supportive, or sexualized imagery. These patterns persist across multiple model architectures and commercial platforms, indicating that generative AI amplifies dominant cultural assumptions rather than neutral representation.

Generative language models similarly reinforce gendered assumptions through sentence completion, occupational associations, and evaluative descriptions. The absence of queer, trans, and non-binary perspectives within training data results in the invisibility of gender plurality and produces computational erasure. In this context, AI becomes an influential cultural producer, shaping the social imagination of gender rather than merely reflecting it.

4.3 Sociotechnical Implications and Ethical Considerations

AI systems that infer and generate gendered identity representations operate within broader infrastructures of governance, surveillance, and platform capitalism. Algorithmic sorting can dictate access to digital resources, influence content exposure, or reinforce discriminatory profiling. Scholars such as Barry and Stephenson [4] argue that generative AI contributes to epistemic injustice, wherein marginalized communities lack representation in both data formation and interpretative authority. This positions AI as a technology of

social regulation with ideological consequences.

The sociotechnical landscape is further complicated by global disparities. Tunjungbiru et al. [5] demonstrate that awareness of algorithmic bias varies substantially between regions, affecting the ability of users to recognize and confront harmful AI practices. Shah [9] emphasizes inequities in digital literacy and access, affecting the capacity of marginalized users to navigate algorithmic environments safely.

4.4 Case-Based Synthesis Summary Table

To support comparative understanding, the following table summarizes dominant patterns identified across key empirical studies.

Table 1. Systematic Patterns in AI-Driven Gender Representation and Classification

Domain of AI System	Research Findings	Primary Source Examples	Key Consequences
Gender Classification (facial, voice, biometric models)	High misclassification rates for transgender, non-binary, and racialized identities; binary operational logic	Ho et al. [6], Locke & Hodgdon [7], De Lima et al. [15]	Psychological harm, exclusion from services, institutional discrimination
Generative AI (text-to-image & language models)	Reproduction of gender stereotypes; underrepresentation of gender-expansive identities	Collyer-Hoar et al. [3], Currie et al. [12], Barry & Stephenson [4]	Cultural stereotyping, symbolic erasure
Healthcare & Educational Deployments	Bias in representation and decision support systems	Currie et al. [12], Buslón et al. [16]	Diagnostic inaccuracy, reduced trust

Sociotechnical & Global Contexts

Limited cultural diversity in datasets and design participation

Tunjungbiru et al. [5], Shah [9]

Inequitable algorithmic governance

Table 1: Systematic Patterns of Algorithmic Gender Representation and Classification in Contemporary AI Systems

4.5 Section Synthesis

The analysis demonstrates that AI systems exert significant influence over how gender identity is categorized and culturally reproduced. Far from being neutral computational tools, these systems operationalize gender through predictive logics grounded in restrictive and binary assumptions. While VR environments offer potential sites of identity liberation, AI tends to regulate identity through classification and representation. The interaction of these forces leads to new forms of identity negotiation, resistance, and conflict, which require deeper investigation at the intersection of technical design, social impact, and ethical accountability.

5. Virtual Reality, Embodied Identity, and Avatar-Mediated Gender Expression

Virtual Reality (VR) environments constitute powerful socio-technological spaces where gender identity is explored, embodied, negotiated, and affirmed in ways that extend beyond the constraints of physical life. Unlike AI systems that tend to infer and categorize gender through algorithmic classification, VR offers immersive, phenomenological spaces of self-construction through avatar embodiment and participatory social interaction. This section examines how VR facilitates psychological, social, and experiential dimensions of gender identity, drawing from empirical studies and community practice. It further contrasts VR's identity-expansive possibilities with the regulatory tendencies of AI systems described in Section 4, establishing VR as a vital counter-space of gender plurality, creativity, and resilience.

5.1 Virtual Embodiment and Identity Construction

At the core of VR's identity-forming potential is the experience of virtual embodiment—where users inhabit and psychologically integrate with an avatar body distinct from their physical form. Research such as Tacikowski et al. [20] demonstrates that immersive body-swap experiences can temporarily shift internal perceptions of gender identity, revealing identity as pliable rather than fixed. This cognitive and affective transformation emerges from the perceptual alignment between physical and virtual movement, producing a sense of presence and selfhood within a virtual body.

For transgender, non-binary, and gender-expansive individuals, virtual embodiment provides access to gender confirmation, euphoria, and self-recognition that may be inaccessible in offline environments due to social, cultural, medical, or financial constraints. Reyes and Fisher [18] found that transgender participants who engaged in avatar-based identity experimentation experienced therapeutic relief, emotional empowerment, and increased clarity regarding their own identity journeys. This suggests that VR functions not simply as a technological tool but as a psychosocial space of becoming.

5.2 Avatar Design, Customisation, and Gender Expression

Avatar creation is a central mechanism through which VR users articulate gender expression. Unlike AI classification systems, which constrain identity through computational categories, avatar construction enables users to design self-representations with intentionality, variation, and embodiment fluidity. Zhang and Juvrud [10] illustrate that VRChat users employ avatars as symbolic extensions of selfhood, using virtual form, voice, gesture, and interaction to enact gender identity beyond material limits. Kang and Rhee [1], in their study of the ZEPETO platform, demonstrate how visual transformation through avatar customization functions as a symbolic process of gender transition, allowing safe experimentation before or during real-world transitioning.

VR platforms that support extensive customisation enable identity fluidity across multiple embodiments, reflecting forms of gender that shift situationally or emotionally. This contrasts materially with AI-based systems that penalise inconsistency or ambiguity. The expressive potential of avatars allows users to resist static identity classifications and

perform dynamic relational identity through movement, interaction, and aesthetic choices.

5.3 Community, Social Support, and Collective Identity

VR ecosystems also facilitate collective identity construction, where users engage in shared narrative worlds that foster belonging and emotional solidarity. Li et al. [17] document how LGBTQ+ communities in VR create affective safety networks that enable vulnerability, mutual care, and resilience. Community formation in social VR relies on participatory presence rather than externally assigned identity labels, enabling inclusive practices that contrast with algorithmic profiling in AI.

Freeman and Acena [19] explore embodied visibility within queer VR spaces and argue that identity performance in VR disrupts normative expectations and produces alternative cultural imaginaries. VR communities function as sites of resistance against offline discrimination, offering spaces where individuals can articulate their identity without fear of surveillance or policing. These findings underscore VR's role in supporting emotional well-being, psychological safety, and identity affirmation.

5.4 Therapeutic, Educational, and Clinical Applications

Beyond social and expressive dimensions, VR has proven effective as a therapeutic tool for transgender and gender-diverse populations. Leyns et al. [2] and Smith et al. [11] demonstrate that VR-based voice training improves speech confidence and reduces gender dysphoria. By integrating multisensory feedback and repetitive practice in safe environments, VR supports users in aligning voice with internal gender identity, addressing a widespread challenge experienced within offline clinical environments. VR's capacity to scaffold gender-affirming experiences highlights the technology's wider relevance across education, health, and rehabilitation.

5.5 Challenges, Limitations, and Platform Constraints

Despite VR's transformative possibilities, challenges persist. VR platforms may reproduce exclusion and harassment through inadequate governance, limited safety mechanisms, and avatar design restrictions. Ristola [8] warns that VR ecosystems risk becoming extensions of normative power unless community-responsive design principles are

implemented. Platforms that restrict non-binary avatar options or enable harassment through weak moderation can undermine VR's liberatory potential. Access inequality—including economic barriers and hardware limitations—also restricts participation, particularly among marginalized communities.

5.6 Comparative Insight: AI vs. VR in Gender Identity Formation

To further clarify the contrast between AI and VR in gender identity mediation, the following comparative table is included:

Table 2. Comparative Dynamics of AI and VR in Gender Identity Mediation

Dimension	AI-Based Systems	VR-Based Environments
Identity Orientation	Classification, prediction, and labeling	Embodiment, performance, and self-definition
Gender Framework	Binary and reductive	Plural, fluid, and self-crafted
User Agency	Limited—external interpretation by system	High—internal expression and experimentation
Psychological Outcome	Misrecognition, stereotyping, exclusion	Euphoria, affirmation, therapeutic potential
Cultural Power	Reinforces normative hierarchies	Enables counter-cultural identity formation
Risk Factors	Surveillance, misclassification, erasure	

Harassment, moderation failures, access disparity

Table 2: Comparative Framework of Identity Mediation between AI and VR Systems

5.7 Section Synthesis

VR provides transformative spaces for the construction, exploration, and affirmation of gender identity through embodied presence, expressive avatar design, and supportive community interaction. Unlike AI technologies that stabilise gender through algorithmic control, VR encourages identity plurality and human agency. The contrast between these systems introduces a critical tension: as AI attempts to fix identity through computational inference, VR opens identity to experiential becoming. Understanding the intersection of these forces is essential for developing inclusive, ethical, and community-centered digital futures.

Figure 1. Comparative positioning of AI-based systems and VR environments across six dimensions of gender identity mediation, using a conceptual 1–5 scale of support for gender plurality and user well-being.

6. Integrated Analysis: Co-Constitution of Gender Identity by AI and VR Technologies

This section synthesizes insights from Sections 4 and 5, presenting an integrated understanding of how AI and VR jointly shape contemporary experiences of gender identity. While AI frequently acts as a regulatory force through algorithmic classification and normative representation, VR operates as a space of embodied self-fashioning and identity exploration. Their convergence in emerging metaverse infrastructures, immersive social platforms, and predictive personalisation ecosystems forms a multilayered sociotechnical environment in which gender identity is both constructed and contested.

6.1 Technological Co-Constitution of Gender

AI and VR increasingly interact within unified digital systems—AI powers detection, moderation, personalisation, and generative content in virtual platforms, while VR provides

the spatial and experiential fabric for identity practices. This co-constitution can reshape gender identity in three principal ways:

1. Predictive Structuring of Experience

AI filters and curates content in VR environments, often reinforcing stereotypical or binary gender norms through recommendation engines and personalized interfaces. Thus, even within freeform avatar spaces, identity expression may be influenced by computational predictions of what a user's gender should be.

2. Embodied Resistance and Reimagination

VR enables lived challenges to algorithmic norms by allowing individuals to express identities that are misrecognized or erased in AI systems. Users may adopt avatars that contradict AI-inferred classifications, asserting autonomy over self-definition.

3. Feedback Loop Between Representation and Experience

AI-generated gender representations contribute to cultural expectations that influence how users craft avatars and perceive others in VR, while VR-driven trends in identity expression create new visible gender practices that may eventually permeate AI training datasets.

These reciprocal dynamics reveal gender identity as an infrastructural relation, formed at the intersection of lived experience, technological logics, and community practices.

6.2 An Integrated Conceptual Model

The conceptual model proposed here outlines four interlinked layers that mediate gender identity in the digitally immersive age:

1. Algorithmic Inference Layer

Defines identity through classification and prediction

(AI functions: gender recognition, profiling, generative representation)

2. Embodiment and Expression Layer

Performs identity through avatar design and virtual corporeality

(VR functions: customization, presence, social interaction)

3. Platform Governance Layer

Regulates what identities are allowed, visible, or marginalized

(Moderation systems, safety protocols, affordance design)

4. Lived Experience and Community Layer

Interprets technological constraints and generates new social meaning

(Peer support, resistance, cultural world-building)

Gender identity emerges from the tensions and alignments between these layers, each carrying a different form of power over identity recognition and experience.

Figure 2. Integrated conceptual model showing relative influence of AI-dominant and VR-dominant processes across four layers: algorithmic inference, embodiment and expression, platform governance, and lived experience and community.

6.3 Socio-Ethical Challenges

Several core challenges arise from the merging of algorithmic identity inference and immersive identity performance:

• Misclassification and Misrecognition

Users may be forced into normative identity categories for access or verification, undermining autonomy.

• Surveillance and Data Extraction

Gender-related behavioral data in VR (gesture patterns, voice modulation, interaction preferences) can be exploited by commercial AI systems for profiling.

• Harassment and Safety Conflicts

VR’s freedom of expression coexists with heightened exposure to harassment, particularly for gender-diverse individuals, while AI moderation tools often misidentify the victim rather than the aggressor.

• Lack of Representation in Design and Policy

Exclusion of queer and trans expertise from technology development perpetuates system-level bias.

Together, these issues reveal a pressing need for intersectional AI ethics and participatory VR design attuned to the lived realities of gender-diverse users.

Figure 3. Conceptual assessment of the relative severity and urgency of key socio-ethical challenges at the intersection of AI, VR, and gender identity (1–5 scale).

6.4 Research Implications and Future Directions

A forward-looking research agenda must bridge technical development with social inquiry:

1. Non-Binary Computational Frameworks

Develop AI architectures that allow gender fluidity, self-determination, and refusal of categorization.

2. Inclusive and Repair-Oriented Data Practices

Expand datasets to reflect gender diversity while protecting privacy and safety.

3. Ethical Governance of Immersive Social Identity

Embed protective structures against harassment, coercion, and exploitative profiling in VR platforms.

4. Co-Design with Affected Communities

Ensure queer, trans, and non-binary individuals have decision-making roles in technology development.

5. Empirical Longitudinal Studies

Examine how long-term engagement with identity technologies affects psychological well-being, self-concept, and social integration.

Future scholarship must emphasize collaborative, multidisciplinary methods, integrating HCI research, algorithm auditing, critical data studies, clinical psychology, and community-based design.

6.5 Section Synthesis

AI and VR represent two contrasting yet interconnected forces in the reconfiguration of gender identity. AI systems tend to reproduce social norms through classification and generative representation, while VR enables lived challenges to those norms through embodied exploration and community support. Their interaction creates a complex identity ecology where gender is continuously negotiated within sociotechnical boundaries.

To support equitable digital futures, it is necessary to reimagine identity infrastructures that respect self-determined gender, support expressive plurality, and redistribute authority from predictive systems to lived experience.

7. Specific Outcomes, Persistent Challenges, and Future Research Directions

This section synthesizes the core findings of the research while outlining remaining challenges and emergent avenues for future investigation. Building upon the integrated analytical framework developed in Sections 4–6, the outcomes of this study reveal the multifaceted ways in which AI and VR technologies shape gender identity, both enabling transformative expressions of selfhood and reinforcing structural constraints.

7.1 Specific Research Outcomes

1. AI and VR play distinct yet interconnected roles in gender identity formation

AI often constrains gender identity through algorithmic classification and generative representation, operating within normative paradigms that reduce identity to binary categories. In contrast, VR provides embodied, immersive spaces for identity experimentation, enabling autonomy and self-determined expression. Together, these technologies constitute a dynamic, co-constitutive identity environment.

2. Algorithmic governance influences identity recognition and cultural meanings

Gender representation in AI systems is heavily influenced by data composition, technological design, and platform-level governance. These systems frequently reproduce gender stereotypes, intensifying misrecognition and exclusion [2] for transgender and non-binary individuals. VR environments, although more flexible, are not exempt from governance issues that affect safety and access.

3. Virtual embodiment facilitates psychological affirmation and community resilience

Empirical research indicates that avatar-based identity experimentation and social presence in VR promote emotional well-being, agency, and belonging, particularly among gender-diverse users navigating identity consolidation or transition. VR thus functions as a psychosocial support environment rather than merely a recreational space.

4. Identity development occurs within complex sociotechnical ecosystems

The study demonstrates that gender identity emerges at the intersection of technological infrastructures, individual lived experience, community practices, and cultural norms. Identity is neither technologically determined nor purely self-defined but is negotiated through feedback cycles between algorithmic inference and embodied digital practice.

7.2 Persistent Challenges

Despite positive potential, significant barriers remain:

• Algorithmic misclassification and imposed identity categories continue to marginalize gender-diverse individuals in AI systems.

• Surveillance and exploitative data extraction risk converting intimate identity information into commercial or institutional control.

• Harassment, hostile interaction, and weak platform governance threaten psychological safety within VR.

• Lack of diverse representation in technology development sustains systemic bias.

• Access inequities, including financial constraints and hardware limitations, exclude marginalized populations from VR's benefits.

• Absence of regulatory frameworks that address the intersection of AI profiling and immersive identity embodiment.

These challenges reveal the necessity of multidisciplinary policy formation, ethical accountability, and community-centered design.

7.3 Future Research Directions

Future scholarship must address methodological, technical, and ethical gaps, including:

1. Development of post-binary computational models enabling gender fluidity and self-declaration without enforced categorization.

2. Participatory design frameworks that integrate queer and trans expertise into decision-making, governance, and data standards.

3. Longitudinal studies investigating how prolonged engagement with VR influences identity formation, social integration, and mental health outcomes.

4. Cross-cultural research to explore how different sociopolitical contexts shape digital

identity experiences.

5. Design of protective VR infrastructures, including automated safety systems, harassment prevention tools, and identity-affirming avatar interfaces.

6. Research into ethical AI integration within metaverse systems, reducing the risk of predictive identity policing.

The future of identity technologies depends on sustained collaborative engagement across technical development, social science analysis, community activism, and ethical governance.

Figure 4. Conceptual prioritisation of key future research directions for gender identity in AI- and VR-mediated environments (1–5 scale).

Conclusion

The convergence of artificial intelligence and virtual reality represents a transformative dimensional shift in how gender identity is lived, understood, and negotiated within digitally mediated environments. AI systems exert powerful influence through algorithmic classification and generative representation, structuring how gender is socially recognized and culturally reproduced. Virtual reality, by contrast, enables embodied identity exploration through avatar mediation, immersive presence, and affective community support, offering expansive possibilities for self-determination, psychological affirmation, and social connection.

The study demonstrates that gender identity in the age of AI and VR cannot be conceptualized as a stable inherent characteristic; instead, it must be understood as a dynamic, relational, and technologically co-constructed process. The dual forces of constraint and liberation produced by algorithmic governance and virtual embodiment create new terrains of identity negotiation, where users navigate between predictive categorization and embodied self-fashioning.

This research underscores the urgent need for inclusive system design, ethical

accountability, and policy frameworks that centerthe lived experiences and expertise of transgender, non-binary, and gender-diverse communities. Without intentional intervention, AI risks institutionalizing reductive gender stereotypes, while VR risks replicating digital forms of harassment and access inequality. Yet with thoughtful implementation, these technologies hold the potential to reimagine identity infrastructures rooted in plurality, autonomy, and dignity.

The future of gender identity will increasingly unfold across immersive and algorithmic spaces. Ensuring that the future advances equity, freedom, and self-determination is both a scholarly responsibility and a collective social imperative.

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