

**EMPOWERING YOUTH: EDUCATION, SOCIAL MEDIA AND AGENCY IN TACKLING
GENDER INEQUALITIES IN YOUNG ADULT FICTION BY SARA FARIZAN AND
NICOLE DENNIS-BENN**

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Abstract

This research paper explores the interplay of education, social media and youth agency in challenging gender inequalities through a literary analysis of **Nicole Dennis-Benn's** novel *Patsy* and *Here Comes the Sun*, alongside **Sara Farizan's** work *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel* and *If You Could Be Mine*. It posits that education—both structured and self-directed—serves as a critical driver of societal change, empowering young individuals with the awareness and skills to confront systemic gender biases. The research paper examines social media's dual role as a space that can perpetuate conventional gender norms while also offering opportunities to challenge them, shaping the complex terrain of identity development. Through close analysis of narrative strategies, character dynamics and thematic currents, this research paper investigates how young protagonists navigate gender identity, sexuality and societal pressures. Nicole Dennis-Benn's works illuminate the intersections of gender expression, family expectations and LGBTQ+ experiences, interwoven with migration and racial identity, offering a rich tapestry of marginalized perspectives. Sara Farizan's novels, meanwhile, capture the nuances of adolescent relationships, exploring self-discovery, peer influence and the pursuit of authenticity in a digitally connected world. This study argues that these narratives highlight the transformative potential of youth as active contributors to gender equity, providing critical insights for educational reform and policy initiatives aimed at fostering inclusivity and justice.

Keywords-: Youth agency, Gender inequalities, Social-media, Young adult fiction, LGBTQ+ experiences.

Introduction

The early 21st century has brought profound changes to the social and cultural environments that shape youth experiences. At the heart of these shifts are education, social media and the growing empowerment of young individuals, especially in relation to gender, sexuality and personal identity. As global communities grapple with ongoing issues like gender-based discrimination, systemic biases and the exclusion of varied perspectives, it becomes essential to examine how education and social media influence young people's self-perception and their positions within power hierarchies.

Education has traditionally been viewed as a key pathway to personal and collective progress, arming youth with essential knowledge, abilities and analytical skills for life navigation. Yet, its assumed impartiality is under scrutiny, as educational systems often mirror and sustain prevailing inequalities. Schools and curricula are not detached from society; they incorporate gender norms, sexual expectations and cultural biases into teaching methods, content and interactions. The extent to which education promotes awareness, questions established stories and encourages students to critique norms plays a vital role in forming youth views on gender.

Social media has emerged as a central element of modern existence, providing unmatched avenues for interaction, sharing and personal articulation. Sites such as Instagram, X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok empower youth to form groups, exchange stories and push for transformation. These platforms can elevate underrepresented groups, promote non-traditional views and support movements against rigid gender and sexual standards, aiding in identity exploration and solidarity. However, they also pose risks, including digital harassment, false information and idealized images that can harm users. Youth, engaging as both producers and users of online content, stand at the crossroads of formal education and digital worlds. Their lives are influenced by intersecting elements like gender,

socioeconomic status, ethnicity, orientation, ability and heritage, inspiring many to advocate for fairness in schools and societies. This paper investigates the connections between education, social media's varied effects and youth empowerment in addressing gender disparities.

To illuminate these themes, the study conducts a detailed examination of selected young adult novels: **Nicole Dennis-Benn's** work *Here Comes the Sun and Patsy* and **Sara Farizan's** work *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel* and *If You Could Be Mine*. These stories offer deep insights into gender and sexual navigation amid contemporary pressures, showing how learning environments and digital tools impact protagonists. For instance, **Sara Farizan's** work *If You Could Be Mine* depicts Iranian teens facing cultural and religious constraints on gender and desire, emphasizing family and societal roles. **Nicole Dennis-Benn's** work *Patsy* examines migration, kinship and queer identity across Jamaican and American contexts.

Utilizing an intersectional lens, this paper considers how multiple identities overlap in youth experiences. It probes the intersections of education, social media, gender, sexuality and identity, demonstrating how stories can reflect and contest dominant paradigms.

Through these literary explorations, the research paper aims to advance discussions on gender fairness, youth empowerment and education's role in justice. It emphasizes literature's value in decoding youth complexities within educational, digital and gendered contexts, ultimately enhancing comprehension of how these elements enable social progress.

Exploring Identity, Heritage and Empowerment in the Novels of Nicole Dennis-Benn and Sara Farizan

Nicole Dennis-Benn and Sara Farizan are two powerful voices in contemporary literature, each drawing from their cultural backgrounds to illuminate the complex lives of women navigating identity, love, and societal expectations. Nicole Dennis-Benn, a Jamaican-American author, often explores the harsh realities of poverty, tourism and queer experiences in Jamaica and beyond. Sara Farizan, an Iranian-American writer, delves into the challenges of growing up queer in immigrant families, blending humor with poignant insights into cultural clashes and self-discovery. Their novels—*Here Comes the Sun* and *Patsy* by Nicole Dennis-Benn and *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel* and *If You Could Be Mine* by Sara Farizan—offer rich tapestries of women's struggles against patriarchal norms, colonial legacies and heteronormative pressures. Through these stories, the authors examine how education can both open doors and reinforce barriers, while social media emerges as a modern tool for identity exploration, often blurring the lines between authenticity and performance. This analysis will break down each novel individually before weaving them together through an intersectional lens, highlighting how factors like gender, sexuality, race, class and culture intersect to shape young women's journeys toward selfhood.

Analysis of Nicole Dennis-Benn's work *Here Comes the Sun*

In her debut novel *Here Comes the Sun* (2016), Nicole Dennis-Benn paints a raw, unflinching picture of life in a Jamaican resort town, where the glittering facade of tourism hides deep-seated poverty and exploitation. The story centers on three women from the same family: Delores, a tough, street-smart vendor; her eldest daughter Margot, an ambitious hotel worker who turns to sex work to fund her dreams; and Thandi, the younger sister pinned with the family's hopes for a better future through education. Set against the backdrop of Montego Bay, the narrative exposes the underbelly of Jamaica's economy, where locals like Margot cater to wealthy foreigners while grappling with their own desires and traumas.

Margot's character is particularly compelling, embodying the tension between personal ambition and familial obligation. She dreams of escaping her circumstances by saving enough to send Thandi to a good school and eventually owning a piece of the resort herself. Yet, her path is fraught with compromises, including a secret relationship with a woman named Verdene, which must remain hidden due to Jamaica's pervasive homophobia. Dennis-Benn masterfully shows how Margot's quest for autonomy clashes with societal demands that women prioritize family and heteronormative roles. Education plays a pivotal role here, especially for Thandi, who attends a prestigious school but feels

alienated by its colorism and class divides—her dark skin becomes a barrier in a system that favors lighter tones and wealth. The novel illustrates education's double-edged sword: it promises upliftment, offering Thandi a chance to break the cycle of poverty, but it also perpetuates inequalities by enforcing colonial standards of beauty and success.

Nicole Dennis-Benn weaves in the broader conflict between tradition and modernity, as the characters navigate a patriarchal society influenced by colonialism. Delores, hardened by years of survival, pushes her daughters toward education as an escape from traditional gender roles, yet the system often traps them further. For instance, Thandi's artistic talents are sidelined in favor of academic rigor, highlighting how education can stifle creativity while upholding oppressive structures.

While social media isn't a central element in the 1990s setting of the book, Nicole Dennis-Benn's portrayal of identity curation resonates with today's digital age. Margot crafts a polished persona at work to attract clients, much like how young people today use platforms like Instagram to project alternate selves. This performative aspect underscores the novel's exploration of authenticity versus illusion, where women like Margot must hide their true identities—queer, resilient, flawed—to survive. In a modern context, one can imagine Margot using social media to connect with queer communities discreetly, bridging the gap between her isolated reality and a wider world of possibility. The book ultimately calls for recognizing the diverse experiences of Jamaican women, advocating for more inclusive spaces in both education and society at large. Through vivid prose and heartbreaking realism, *Here Comes the Sun* reveals the human cost behind paradise, urging readers to confront the intersections of class, race and sexuality that shape women's lives.

Analysis of Nicole Dennis-Benn's work *Patsy*

Building on the themes of her debut, Nicole Dennis-Benn's work *Patsy* (2019) shifts the focus to migration and the immigrant experience, following a queer Jamaican woman who leaves her homeland for the promise of America. The protagonist, *Patsy*, abandons her young daughter Tru in Jamaica to pursue a life with her long-lost love, Cicely, in New York. What begins as a quest for freedom turns into a tale of disillusionment, as *Patsy* faces undocumented life, low-wage jobs, and cultural isolation. Alternating between *Patsy's* struggles in the U.S. and Tru's coming-of-age back home, the novel dissects the emotional toll of separation and the myths of the American Dream.

Patsy's journey highlights education's unfulfilled promises for marginalized women. In Jamaica, she had aspirations beyond her circumstances, but migration forces her into menial work like cleaning and caregiving, despite her intelligence. This contrast exposes how systemic barriers—racism, xenophobia, and classism—undermine educational ambitions, turning potential empowerment into exploitation. For Tru, left behind, education becomes a tool for survival and rebellion; she excels in school but grapples with abandonment issues, eventually exploring her own queer identity through soccer and friendships.

The novel also probes the role of social media in maintaining connections across borders. *Patsy* uses it sporadically to check on Tru and Cicely, but it often amplifies her sense of estrangement—virtual glimpses of home remind her of what she's lost, while curated online lives hide the grit of immigrant reality. This mirrors broader experiences of diaspora communities, where digital platforms offer solace but can deepen feelings of inauthenticity. Nicole Dennis-Benn sensitively portrays *Patsy's* queer identity, showing how migration allows her to live more openly yet exposes her to new forms of marginalization as a Black, undocumented lesbian.

Overall, *Patsy* is a poignant exploration of belonging, sacrifice, and resilience. It challenges readers to consider how education and social media intersect with identity for queer women of color, often empowering them in theory but marginalizing them in practice. Through *Patsy's* and Tru's parallel arcs, Nicole Dennis-Benn illustrates the intergenerational impact of migration, emphasizing the need for empathy and systemic change.

Analysis of Sara Farizan's *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel*

Sara Farizan's *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel* (2014) is a charming yet insightful young adult novel that captures the awkwardness of teenage self-discovery through the eyes of Leila, an

Iranian-American high schooler at a posh private academy. Leila has managed to fly under the radar about her sexuality until the arrival of Saskia, a glamorous new student who sparks an intense crush. As Leila navigates her feelings, she contends with family expectations, cultural heritage and the heteronormative pressures of her school environment.

Education in the novel serves as both a battleground and a sanctuary. Armstead Academy represents privilege, but for Leila, it's a place of mixed blessings—empowering her intellectually while reinforcing power imbalances through cliques and unspoken rules about conformity. Her parents, Iranian immigrants, view education as the key to success, pushing Leila toward medicine like her sister, but this ignores her passions and internal struggles. The story deftly shows how schools can perpetuate oppressions, such as when Leila faces subtle racism or homophobia, yet also offer moments of growth, like forming bonds with diverse peers.

Social media plays a subtle but significant role in Leila's identity formation. She uses it to observe crushes and curate her online presence, creating a space where she can experiment with her queer self away from real-world scrutiny. This highlights the novel's theme of authenticity versus performance: online, Leila can blur lines between her true feelings and the facade she maintains for her conservative family. Sara Farizan infuses humor into these tensions, making Leila's voice relatable and witty, as she quips about her crushes and cultural mishaps.

The book underscores the intersections of ethnicity, sexuality and gender in shaping youth experiences. Leila's Iranian heritage adds layers of complexity—family dinners filled with Persian traditions clash with her secret desires, reflecting broader immigrant youth struggles. Farizan advocates for inclusivity, showing how acknowledging diversity in education and digital spaces can foster true self-expression. With its light-hearted tone masking deeper truths, *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel* is a celebration of queer awakening amid cultural crossroads.

Analysis of Sara Farizan's *If You Could Be Mine*

Sara Farizan's debut *If You Could Be Mine* (2013) transports readers to contemporary Iran, where Sahar, a bright teenager, faces an impossible choice in her forbidden love for her best friend Nasrin. In a society where homosexuality is illegal but gender reassignment is state-supported, Sahar considers transitioning to a man so she can marry Nasrin legally. This premise allows Farizan to explore profound questions of identity, love and sacrifice against a backdrop of strict cultural and religious norms.

Sahar's high school experience encapsulates education's empowering yet limiting nature. As a top student aiming for medical school, she sees learning as a path to independence, but patriarchal structures—arranged marriages, gender segregation—constrain her. The novel contrasts traditional Iranian values with modern aspirations as Sahar encounters the underground trans community, learning about gender fluidity in a way her formal education never addresses. This tension reveals how education can liberate by broadening horizons but also perpetuate oppressions by ignoring queer and trans realities.

Social media, though limited in Iran's censored landscape, aids Sahar's self-exploration. She uses it covertly to research transitions and connect with others, blurring authenticity and secrecy in her digital life. This mirrors global youth experiences, where online spaces provide refuge but risk exposure. Farizan handles these themes with sensitivity, portraying Sahar's multifaceted identity—shaped by class (her father's modest means), culture and sexuality—as a call for greater equity.

The story champions diversity, urging inclusive approaches in education and society to support young people's varied paths. *If You Could Be Mine* is a heartbreaking yet hopeful narrative, illuminating the resilience required to claim one's truth in restrictive worlds.

Intersectional Analysis

Drawing on intersectionality—a framework coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to examine how overlapping identities like race, gender, class, and sexuality create unique experiences of oppression—these novels reveal the multifaceted challenges faced by young women. Nicole Dennis-Benn's Jamaican protagonists in *Here Comes the Sun* and *Patsy* intersect poverty, blackness and queerness

with colonial legacies, showing how education promises mobility but often reinforces racial and class hierarchies. Similarly, Sara Farizan's Iranian-American and Iranian characters in *Tell Me Again How A Crush Should Feel* and *If You Could Be Mine* navigate ethnicity, immigration and sexuality amid heteronormative patriarchies, where cultural traditions clash with personal desires.

Across the works, education emerges as a site of empowerment and restriction, particularly for queer women of color. Margot and Patsy's ambitions are thwarted by economic exploitation, while Leila and Sahar's schooling highlights cultural assimilation pressures. Social media amplifies these dynamics, offering tools for identity curation but exacerbating isolation or performance anxiety in marginalized contexts.

These narratives expose intersecting oppressions: patriarchy silences women's voices, heteronormativity erases queer love, racism devalues non-white experiences, and class limits access to resources. By centering diverse protagonists, the authors advocate for inclusivity, pushing for educational reforms that embrace intersectional identities and digital spaces that foster genuine connection. Ultimately, these books remind us that true liberation requires dismantling these intertwined systems, allowing youth to thrive in their full complexity.

In conclusion, *Nicole Dennis-Benn* and *Sara Farizan's* novels are vital contributions to literature, blending personal stories with broader critiques. They invite readers to reflect on their own intersections, fostering empathy in an increasingly divided world.

Conclusion

This research paper investigates education, social media and youth agency's ties in tackling gender disparities via textual analysis of Nicole Dennis-Benn's *Here Comes the Sun* and *Patsy*, and Sara Farizan's *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel* and *If You Could Be Mine*. An intersectional approach reveals these stories as reflections and critiques of youth realities. Findings show education's dual empowerment and reinforcement of dynamics and social media's space for expression amid risks. Protagonists, facing gender, sexuality, race, culture and status challenges, demonstrate youth resilience and agency. Nicole Dennis-Benn's novels explore gender, family, immigration; Sara Farizan's focus on discovery, peers, authenticity in digital eras, particularly Iranian contexts. The paper affirms youth's change-making potential, offering reform insights for inclusivity. It highlights literature's role in understanding youth, fostering critical awareness and responsible digital engagement for equitable societies.

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Keywords

youth agency, gender inequalities, education, social media, young adult fiction, intersectionality, LGBTQ+ experiences, self-discovery, societal change, literary analysis