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Designing Queer Connection

An Ethnography of Dating App Production in Urban India

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India is currently at the precipice of immense social and technological change. The proliferation of smartphones and growth of the nation's app economy raise questions about how digital platforms might influence the contours of love, sex, and desire in the region in the coming decades. This paper engages with these concerns by examining what it means to design intimate connection for LGBTQ communities in non-western spaces. Drawing on fieldnotes, app walkthroughs, interviews with mid-level and upper-level professionals in the dating app space as well as audiovisual material from advertising archives, this paper provides readers with a critical analysis of the "problem" of designing queer connection in a digital world of abundant data and transient identities. Carefully examining the production practices of Delta, India's first locally produced LGBTQ dating app I argue that there is a pressing need for scholarship on industry dynamics beyond western technology centers.

INTRODUCTION

The winter air was still crisp, but the late morning sun felt pleasantly warm on my skin as I sat in an auto, speeding along the wide tree-lined roads of Lutyens Delhi¹. It was Valentine's Day weekend, and I was making my way to the center of the city to attend a queer cultural event titled 'Gaylentines Day.' The event was organized by a Delhi based youth group in partnership with *Delta*, the first (and only) dating app specifically targeting the Indian LGBTQ community. The six-hour long Gaylentines Day extravaganza was aimed at Delhi college going students² and consisted of short plays, drag performances, open mic shows, and an in-person speed dating event coordinated by Delta. Founded in Fall of 2017, the app was the culmination of its founder Ishaan Sethi's goal to create a dating community for queer Indians. In the opening remarks for the event, an upper level executive present, began by describing Delta's vision and mission saying –

*"As Delta we are the first LGBTQIA+ dating app in India that is homegrown for and by Indians. Today we have grown to a community of over sixty thousand users from all sorts of backgrounds. From all sorts of identities, and every single day we are growing more and more"*³

These words simultaneously emphasize the cultural specificity of the Indian queer experience and the app's commitment to catering to the romantic and sexual desires of individuals with varied sexual orientations. The choice to target the entirety of the LGBTQ spectrum stands in distinct contrast to industry norms where most non-heterosexual dating apps focus on a specific niche, most often gay men, as their core user base (Murray and Ankersen 2016). In addition, it implicitly suggests that there is something unique about local sociocultural dynamics in India that international dating apps popular in the country are not addressing. Therefore, in this paper I examine how Delta constructs digital categories and incorporates affordances of smartphone-based dating platforms to try and provide agency to Indian queer users searching for intimate connections. Analyzing the ways in which a unique

player in an evolving dating app ecosystem approaches notions of “queerness” and “Indianness” is an avenue to explore broader questions regarding human agency, queer identity, and technology affordances.

Approach: Queer Theory Meets Media Industry Studies

In this paper, I incorporate perspectives from Critical Queer Theory and Media Industry Studies. Scholars of Queer Theory such as Dean (2000), Giffney and Rourke (2009), Lowe (2015) and Puar (2018) emphasize the importance of critically examining structuring forces of institutions, infrastructures and historical legacies while recognizing the place for individual agency through play, creativity, and resistive performance. This makes it a useful analytic approach to engage with ideas about sexuality outside the realm of individuals and into the realm of industries, without being drawn into the quagmire of binary debates about technological determinism (or lack thereof). Queer Theory has been used to critically examine the new mobilities McGlotten (2013) and changing spatiotemporal relationships Baudinette (2018) arising from our everyday interactions through dating apps. However overall, research on dating platforms⁴, both globally and in the small number of India specific studies, tends to focus on user experiences (Albury et al. 2017; Dasgupta 2018) and/or platform affordances (Shah 2015; MacLeod and McArthur 2019; Ferris and Duguay 2019), leaving a critical cultural analysis of dating app industry production relatively unexamined. The handful of empirical qualitative studies on the industry dynamics of queer dating apps, such as Murray and Ankerson’s (2016) research on the production of sociality through the design decisions of the founder of the lesbian dating app Datch⁵ and Wang’s (2019) exploration of labor practices involved in livestreams of Chinese gay mens dating app BlueD, show that industry dynamics can be extremely rich sites of analysis to understand the construction of queer possibilities through digital design.

Despite India being one the fastest growing mobile phone app economies in the world (Mitter 2019; Mandel and Long 2019), there have been little to no ethnographic studies on Indian app production cultures. In contrast, there is a long history of ethnographic academic research on the advertising (Mazzarella 2003), film (Ganti 2012) and television (Kumar 2010) industries in India. Insights from this body of work highlight how analyses of media/tech cultures can make compelling claims about the evolving nature of globalization, citizenship, modernity, and identity politics. Therefore, in this paper I draw inspiration from ethnographies of production cultures within established screen/media industries but shift the site of study to emerging digital mobile app industries. Noting the significant lack of research on app production cultures beyond Silicon Valley centers, the paper concentrates on examining how “queerness” becomes a product/experience accessible through digital platforms in India. To do this, I draw on a mixture of in-depth interviews, ethnographic observation of industry events and a curated archive of digital material (Ex. advertisements, magazine reports, app walkthroughs)⁶. I collected primary data (participant observation, interviews) during eleven months of fieldwork across the cities of Mumbai, Bangalore, and New Delhi within the corporate offices of dating apps and ancillary industries operating in the country⁷. Information that Although I integrate insights from qualitative data gathered across this time period, the majority of this paper draws on information gathered during four months (November 2018 - March 2019), when, following the Supreme court verdict

decriminalizing homosexuality on 6th September 2018, dating apps began to more explicitly target the Indian queer market⁸.

“INDIA’S FIRST DATING APP FOR THE LGBTQIA+ COMMUNITY. FOR INDIANS. BY INDIANS”

Taking Delta as a specific case that reflects broader industry issue, I first analyze corporate imaginaries of ‘queerness’ and ‘Indianness’, paying attention to the vision of company founders and funding pressures surrounding the early development of the app. Doing so, I identify five key challenges involved in producing a dating platform for users across the LGBTQ spectrum given the specific regional history of homosexuality in India.

Imagining Queerness

Winter in Delhi is a time of smog filled skies, cool nights and the smell of fresh yams being roasted road-side. It is by far my favorite season in the city. The morning after I landed at Indira Gandhi International airport in November 2018, I sat on the verandah of the guesthouse that was to become home for the next few months trying to fix up meetings with people working within the dating app industry. At the end of my emails and WhatsApp messages to contacts from previous field visits (in 2016 and 2017), I included a short request asking if there was anyone else, they could think of that I should speak to for my research. Within a couple of hours, three separate individuals had responded saying they would be happy to meet, and there was someone I “*must* try and talk to.” That person was Ishaan Sethi the young founder of Delta. Three weeks and a handful of email exchanges later I found myself at Delta’s south Delhi office, sitting in a conference room surrounded walls of clear glass, talking to Ishaan about the origins of the app. Between sips of *chai* he explained that the idea for Delta arose from the frustrations he felt as a self-identified gay single man using dating apps after moving back to India from New York four years ago –

“People had taken my images and made fake profiles. I was getting catfished left, right and center. I would meet people who I had never met in the lanes of Malviya Nagar. I could have been raped and killed, but it did not happen, thank God. And that’s kind of how this got started. I mean apps like Grindr are so sexual. You are telling me there is this dude is four feet in front of me, with a shirtless picture zoomed in...The environment is so sexual that it is pretty much all it caters to.”⁹

The phenomenon described in the quote above – catfishing, risks surrounding public cruising cultures – are not unique to the Indian context. However, the illegality and social stigma that are part of the Indian queer experience only exacerbate the risks of involved in dating online. The norm of explicitly sexual imagery language on gay male dating apps alongside with the risk of violence, moral policing and catfishing, left Ishaan feeling like there was an un-addressed niche in the market for queer folk (both men and women) who wanted to have a safer and less overtly sexual experience dating online, and the idea for Delta was born¹⁰. The decision to create an app for queer users broadly (as opposed to just gay men), was in part a result of an extended period of market research while the company was being incubated within an established local Indian dating app, TrulyMadly.

Ishaan describes one of his initial conversations with the co-founder of TrulyMadly Sachin Bhatia saying –

“So Sachin kind of spoke to me and said why don’t you lead something like this for me. Cause you are out, you have the skillset I am looking for, product, tech guy, good in business, raised funding, yada, yada, yada. Young, you know... exposed to the US but grew up here. Kind of understands the best of both worlds.”

Skills perceived as positive assets for leading a dating app startup are – knowledge of products and technologies, familiarity with business logics, understanding startup funding structures, youthfulness, and an ability to be intelligible to both a ‘western’ and ‘Indian’ audience. It is this allusion to a cosmopolitan sensibility (“exposed to the US but grew up here. Kind of understands the best of both worlds”) that is particularly notable when juxtaposed with the company’s brand identity of being “homegrown.” Delta explicitly advertises its brand with the tagline “For Indians by Indians” and “homegrown,” variations of this statement are present in its app interface and across public communication materials¹¹. However, it appears that when imagining what it takes to be a successful dating app startup, significant value is placed on an app producer’s ability to operate within global flows of information and resources. This does not necessarily take away from Delta’s emphasis on being uniquely Indian, but rather points to the continued importance of being able to operate within a global network of elite actors/institutions to build a successful dating app in India.

Mobilizing Queerness

During the process of market research investigating the feasibility of Delta, Ishaan was guaranteed time, space, and resources by TrulyMadly, this included access to backend technical infrastructure (including servers), mentorship, industry connections, and an office space to work in. The support provided by TrulyMadly was particularly generous considering the lack of overall investment in dating apps in India (following a spike in 2014-2016). Access to these resources meant that the founding vision/conceptualization of Delta was not as circumscribed by funding pressures as the majority of Indian startups waiting on seed support from traditional incubators. The relative freedom allowed Ishaan to take several months to conduct in-depth market research (Ex. focus groups with LGBTQ individuals, working with established queer rights NGOs) on the kind of app that would be successful. As a result of this research, Ishaan decided that shared issues of marginalization and persecution faced by members across the India queer community made a dating app targeting the entire LGBTQ spectrum a viable product. However, mobilizing this expansive imagination queerness within a marketable app meant dealing with several challenges. The week after my initial meeting with Ishaan, I returned to Delta’s office to speak to the technology team working on the app, to try and understand the everyday process of developing the app. The entire ground floor office was in the middle of moving to a brand new space in Gurgaon, a business and technology hub on the outskirts of Delhi (with cheaper rent and more square feet), luckily we found a small empty room down the hallway and squeezed around a small conference table. After a few pleasantries about the state of the move (most were excited since it meant a shorter commute time from their homes) I began

going through the list of questions I had scribbled on my notepad earlier in the day. Among them, was a standard question about “challenges” that came with building a new dating app. In response, a developer succinctly summarized the varied contradictions they grappled with every day, saying –

"We have more genders, and more matching, and everybody has to have the right match, and some people don't know what terms mean so they just click on things. And there have to be more users also, because otherwise there will just be just two people with the same preferences. But we cannot just let everybody in, because we need verification. And there is still a social taboo, because being gay is still a big thing still. So, it's difficult"

His response reveals at least five intersecting issues Delta's team grapple with - technology, pedagogy, scale, safety, and culture. There is the technological/design challenge involving creating an algorithm and navigable app interface that can effectively match people while continuing to provide users with multiple sexual orientations and gender combinations to choose between. Related to this is the pedagogical challenge of educating users about what terms used to signify different gender and sexual orientations mean, while keeping the app UX clean and navigable. For instance, “non-binary” was one of the gender identities provided to users on the app in an effort by the company be more gender inclusive. However, in focus groups with users Delta found people tended to choose this option without knowing what it meant, and the company was working on including a succinct definition of the term that would help users make an appropriate choice. In addition, there was a problem of scale, where the challenge lay in offering people varied categories alongside which they could orient their sexual desires/identities, while ensuring there were enough people within each category to allow for a person to have a large pool of matches. Compounding issues of scale was the apps emphasis on safety, that meant including a vetting process for each user entering the platform, however this ran the risk of de-incentivizing/limiting the speed with which new users became active members. Finally, the developer noted the underlying the social stigma surrounding homosexuality that made users cautious of joining a queer dating app. While the broad types of challenges discussed above are by no means exhaustive, they capture how issues of technology, business design and social context blur together in app production¹¹. In the following sections I expand on some of the ways in which these issues play out in Delta's effort to ensure the safety of its users given the particular risks of being queer in India and historical legacies of surveillance through dating platforms.

ISSUES OF SECURITY AND SURVEILLANCE

Over the last fifteen years there have been several cases where individuals (mostly gay men) on online dating platforms have been prosecuted and/or publicly shamed for their activity on these sites. For instance, in 2006, before the era of apps, members of the police force in Lucknow (a large city in northern India) set up fake profiles on the then popular dating website ‘guysformen’ and struck up conversations with genuine members on the site. The masquerading police officers created profiles where they listed themselves as gay and ended up inviting five men to rendezvous at a local city park. When the men they had

solicited turned up – the police immediately arrested them on charges of homosexuality under Section 377 of the Indian penal code.

In a similar story five years later, in 2011, a local TV channel (TV9) in Hyderabad aired a seven-minute segment called “Gay Culture Rampant in Hyderabad.” This television segment consisted of a ‘sting operation’ where TV9 reporters found details of users of Planet Romeo, a dating site for gay men, and publicly outed users by divulging their photos, phone conversations, and chats. Although homosexuality had been temporarily decriminalized by a high court verdict during that time (2009-2012), the sting operation still held massive repercussions by publicly shaming several individuals who were not yet “out” as gay. Talking to funders, developers, and designers working within the dating app space in Delhi and Bangalore about what made queer dating in India different, the most common response was the “taboo nature” of the activity compared to perceived experiences in a vaguely defined ‘west.’ For instance, a UX designer working for multiple dating app startups explained – “It is an accepted thing *there*,” quickly followed by “But *here*, dating is taboo. A Grindr or a Tinder was built to date or hookup from *that* context there.” What I believe is particularly interesting here (and the focus of this paper) is not about whether queer experiences truly differ between geographic regions, but rather about how perceptions of intrinsic cultural difference might influence app production. The underlying premise of Delta was based on the perceived discrepancy that uniquely Indian queer needs were being left unaddressed by hypersexualized gay male dating apps and risk of public persecution faced by LGBTQ identifying individuals.

Verifying authenticity

In my conversations with people working at Delta I was keen to better understand how safety was operationalized over their platform. Ishaan explained the issues faced in the early development stage of the app saying –

“There was a problem of fake profiles, there was an issue regarding people not being able to trust the other person across them. Plus, with 377 in place, people did not want to reveal their identity. People did not want to be talking about it openly. So, it was more about letting people know it was a safe platform. This run by people from within the community. We are not taking your information. This information is just being used to match you better.”

Thus, at Delta, safety depended on ensuring users on the platform were genuine and verified, and establishing the authenticity of users was conceptualized as an integral feature of the app. The essence of the approach to verifying authenticity, I was told, was to “create a self-trusting environment where people were rewarded for creating a more trustworthy profile.” Here, the notion of authenticity was premised on the strength of two characteristics – One, the degree to which information provided on the app suggested that a profile belonged to a real person. Two, that the person who the profile belonged to was “actually queer.” Authenticity received a numeric descriptor through a ‘Trust Score¹³’ assigned to each individual user based on the degree to which they met a series of verification criteria elicited during the sign-up process. Users with higher trust scores were treated as more authentic/verified and therefore received better in-app features such as more credit (called

‘sparks’) and better matching recommendations. In this way, a user’s experience on the platform was based on how genuine they were perceived by the app system.

Table 2. Breakdown of Delta’s Trust Score

Verification Criteria	Trust Score Percentage
Facebook account	30
Mobile number	5
Instagram account	10
Email address	5
Selfie (taken in app)	50

Percentage breakdown taken from information available within the app.

When a user linked their social media accounts (Ex. Facebook and Instagram) an automated algorithm was used to check the ‘authenticity’ of the profile based on indicators such as the duration for which the social media account has been active (“So if your FB account was created in the last few months it probably is someone who just made for the purpose of being on our app”) and the ratio of friends to length an account has been active (“If you have been around Facebook for like 6 years but have 3 friends on that profile it [the automated algorithm] will say hey something is fishy here”). If a user passed the automated algorithms scrutiny, they received the entirety of the trust score percentage associated with the particular criteria. In other words, an individual could not get a partial trust score for a single criterion. This use of online presence checks as markers of ‘authenticity’ is not new, it is a tactic commonly used across a range of social media platforms and dating apps (Ward 2016). Where things got complicated in the case of Delta was at ‘selfie verification’, a largely manual process where a small moderation team looked through each individual selfie submitted by a user to ensure the image was of a real person, and that the selfie matched other photos on the social media profiles linked with that user. In a cover story of the company by an Indian online LGBTQ magazine (FSOG 2018), the marketing manager of Delta described the unusual quandaries of this moderation process saying –

“Yes, it means I start my day with at least 30 penis pictures, about a dozen cis-men pretending to be trans women just to exist on the app. Yes, that does leave a wrinkle on my nose, but it goes away when I realize that I’ve gone through these profiles, filtered them and every day I make Delta a safer place for the Indian queer community to just be themselves.”

Variations of this experience were echoed in my one-on-one discussions with the handful of people who moderated selfies for Delta, and I quickly learnt that the main issue they faced was of straight men pretending to be ‘queer’ (these men wanted to only meet women on the platform). Overall, there is a high male to female ration across *all* dating apps operating in the country, with industry estimates ranging from seven men for every three women to nine men for every woman (Singh 2018). However, for most other dating apps male overrepresentation does not retract from the fundamental premise of the service. For a queer dating app however the issue of “a bunch of straight men pretending to be bi and hitting on women” as a member of a team put it, was particularly problematic because it diluted the central proposition app of Delta which was to cater to LGBTQ needs. To deal

with this problem, selfie moderators paid attention to profiles of male users that “looked straight.” That is, had no visually defining femme features as well as profiles that listed “interested in women” and/or were flagged as inappropriate by other users. While the team did not directly discriminate against specific users, the indirect profiling of what “queerness should look like” was premised on a structure of surveillance and conformity that seems to be antithetical to the transgressive roots of queerness¹⁴. In India, there is a long and rich lineage of subaltern cultural formations developing around non-heteronormative sexualities that continue to be claimed as identity groups in the present (Ex. Hijra, Kothi, Arvani, Kinnar). The English word queer was adopted by Indian activists in the 90s to assert the collective marginalization of these subaltern sexual identities and demand institutional and political changes recognizing the rights of these communities, through collective organization (Narain 2004). While shared marginalization provides a powerful unifying force for rights-based initiatives, a separate set of issues emerge when operationalizing the term to provide romantic matches over a dating app. Delta’s efforts to ensure “safety” by verifying users as authentic (as truly members of the LGBTQ community) runs into contradictions operating at two levels. The first is the contradiction of trying to be open, diverse, and non-judgmental about how people might choose to express their sexual orientation yet as a platform having to make narrow judgements about how LGBTQ sexuality should be portrayed. The second is that the idea of queerness as an open, fluid expansive mode of imagining sexual desire/orientation/gender identity is antithetical to the mode of self-disclosure required by users on the platform. This critique of the redemptive possibilities often associated with new digital technologies, is an important one to note because it emphasizes how apps operate systems with larger systems of power. And raises the important question of what kinds of performances of identity and desire are brought under the fold of popular conceptions of queerness.

MEASURING QUEERNESS, QUEERING MEASURES

“Two cappuccino’s ma’am?” the cashier at a little south Delhi coffee shop chain loudly confirmed over the sound of Ariana Grande’s *Thank U, Next* on the stereo. “Yes, please” I nodded, grabbed the two cups, and began to weave through a sea of MacBook laptops (and their owners) to a table at the corner of the room. As I slid onto my seat, I was struck by how similar the cafe’s aesthetic and clientele were to a hipster coffee shop in Ann Arbor, New York, London, Istanbul or for that matter any cosmopolitan capital in the world. Everyone around me looked under the age of forty, there was a generous smattering of (white) expats, and the sun-kissed walls boasted hanging leafy plants. This young, urban, economically mobile clientele with their disposable income and familiarity with digital trend were the ideal user for dating apps (both heterosexual and homosexual) in the country. For instance, in 2015 TrulyMadly, the India based heterosexual dating app company that incubated Delta, described their ideal users in an early vision board with the words - “independent, evolved, outgoing, liberal, urban, semi urban, progressive, anxious, aspirational, opinionated, influenced”. Sitting across from me, on a mid-century modern style wooden chair was the marketing manager for *Delta*. This was our fourth time meeting in the last two months, and the nervousness that comes with first time interviews had finally begun to morph into a less formal camaraderie.

Today we were meeting to talk about potential ideas for a new video ad campaign *Delta* was hoping to launch in the upcoming months. This was going to be the company's first video campaign and they wanted to get the tone right. The company's founder who I had spoken to several times earlier had suggested we chat, and I was only too happy to get a chance to brainstorm ideas. Working as a PhD researcher using ethnographic methods within an industry space, I often felt indebted to the generosity of professionals employed with dating apps for their time answering my long-winded questions. So, it was always pleasant when conversations became collaborative. Breaking down the state of affairs, the marketing manager began by saying "We are just stuck at the communication bit. So, couple of ideas...So we can't get our finger on it...Should we go with a hard-hitting sort of a video?" They went on to explain that the company was playing around with four different concepts for their first ad. The four versions shared several similarities - they were all short (between two to four minutes), they featured Indians with varied LGBTQ identities interested in finding a romantic connection and each ended with the same tagline about Delta.

What varied between the four video concepts was the degree to which the difficulties of being queer in India was acknowledged. That is, the ads ranged from focusing on the celebratory promise of queer love in India in a post-377 world towards explicitly emphasizing the continued transgressive nature of living life as an individual with LGBTQ desires¹⁵ in the country. More specifically, the role of the dating app in the ad varied from being a tool to express one's queer desire at an individual level (find a partner, meet new people, date), to being a vehicle to mobilize the everyday forms of resistance involved in being queer, at a societal level (building community, recognizing collective difficulties). While the organization suspected that the more positive, celebratory presentation of LGBTQ dating would work better in the light of the general positive sentiment following the repeal of section 377. The marketing manager succinctly critiqued the problems of this portrayal of queer dating saying -

"I am tired of the rosiness. As a queer woman I am tired of it. My friend has known she is a lesbian for 15 years, her parents are really accepting people. She is now nearly thirty, it took half her life for her parents to talk about her girlfriend. Homosexuality has just been decriminalized. Half the people do not know what section 377 is. Half the people do not know... they think you can get married. *Abbi bbi*¹⁶ there is not this awareness and you are giving me this fairy tale of an advertisement. Why? After some time, advertising and storytelling has to address issues that are pertinent to the times. Advertising these days especially when it comes to queer communication has forgotten the important of insight. A good story in advertising is made with insights and ideas. That's my main problem with Indian mainstream queer communication...no insight..."

The disjuncture between the "rosiness" of queer communication and the perceived lack of insight that they note, I suggest is perhaps a consequence of the different ways in which users of these platforms are imagined by investors. For instance, when I asked them the purpose of the ad they explained – It is to get us downloads. That is, it, our investors have told us we need a certain amount of daily active users and monthly active users as results for them to believe we have enough customers. So, this is targeted as getting us downloads for sure." The framing of app success in terms of number of downloads and daily active users is a common metric of defining success, however it is perhaps worth considering the

limitations of such an imagination of the user given particular weight of both the history of criminalization of homosexuality in the country and the moral panics surrounding sexuality in relation to new communication technologies. Managing to keep the balance between making a pertinent political statement and keeping a message palatable for a broad audience is not something new. What is unique here is the rapidly changing politics of queerness in the country that mean that app producers are having to grapple with the framing of how to simultaneously educate, advance and profit from LGBTQ+ dating apps in a fast-growing mobile phone market.

A key issue in marketing a dating app for the LGBTQ+ broadly in India is the inability of metrics of app success (number of downloads, daily active users, monthly active users) to accurately capture the messiness of everyday Indian queer experience, with its specific history of marginalization and criminalization. *Delta's* emphasis on being “homegrown” and catering to the needs of the Indian queer community runs into a roadblock when deeper issues of metrics of success for investors continue to be defined in terms of universalizing measures of “success” and “impact” that do not necessarily take into account the intricacies of regional experience. When commoditizing something that has historically been a rights-based issue (freedom to legally and socially express LGBTQ desires) the standard measurements of app “success” can fail to account for the weight of marginalization and resistance associated with terms like queerx. In the process of converting the messy qualia of queer desire into clean numbers there lies a risk of losing/erasing what makes intimacy human.

CONCLUSION

While there have been repeated calls by scholars to move towards more “global” theory building, there are still a limited number of empirical accounts attempting to contextualize insights about digitally mediated intimacies in non-western spaces. Both human desires and app infrastructures operate within a tangled web of emotions, cultural histories, technological possibilities, and happenstance. For *Delta*, a company trying to address the romantic/connective needs of different identity groups within the LGBTQ umbrella, highlighting shared experiences across this spectrum becomes integral to maintaining an inclusive brand identity. However, catering to the varied sexual orientations encompassed within this umbrella is often difficult. Situating my research within the specific social, linguistic, cultural, and legal history of India, I observe how *Delta* engages with legacies of surveillance, criminalization, and social dynamics that surround queer experiences in India. *Delta* grapples with the issue of surveillance through fake profiles meant to “out” queer users by attempting to verify the authenticity of members on the platform to ensure safety. However, striking the balance between verifying authenticity while being non-judgmental about how queerness is expressed, is difficult to strike for a platform that prides itself on inclusivity of multiple sexual orientations and holds an expansive vision of forms sexual desires can take. Exploring how the app sign-up process is designed to authenticate its users, I suggest that dating apps run the risk of reinforcing the systems of surveillance through digital communicative platforms that have controlled queer bodies. I emphasize how the anti-identarian, fluid and ephemeral qualities of queerness (as a concept and an umbrella term for marginalized identities) intrinsically resists classificatory systems popular in the

contemporary app industry that tends to prefer clean categorization of what are inherently messy human experiences.

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NOTES

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1. Neighborhood in central Delhi designed by British architect Sir Edwin Lutyens. Houses several international consulates and Indian government buildings.
2. Both individuals who identified as queer, and straight folk who considered themselves to be queer allies.
3. Emphasis in italics made by author.
4. Both queer (LGBTQ) and heterosexual.
5. Later rebranded as “Her.”
6. The majority of direct evidence present in this paper are variations of statements that have been also been made by the company in public settings/to media organizations. Triangulating claims in interviews against broader statements helped me identify key/important themes. This approach was inspired by Caldwell's (2008) production studies approach to gathering and analyzing material from industry sources by critically assessing each source based on its degree of embeddedness within institutional hierarchies.
7. Field visits to these cities took place in three chunks - Summer 2016, Summer 2017, Winter/Spring 2018-2019.
8. Following the verdict leading Chinese gay male app, BlueD set up a regional headquarter in Noida Delhi. Tinder India launched 23 different gender identity options in the country. Planet Romeo and Grindr began to actively advertise in gay pride events across metropolitan centers. These corporate decisions and technological developments are emblematic of an industry trying to quickly cash-in/adapt to a balance in risk and reward that seemed to have finally tipped in favor of a more open acceptance of LGBTQ sexuality in the public sphere.
9. While a personal story, this is not privileged information. Variations of this origin story have been recounted in public interviews and podcasts for example on the podcast Keeping it Queer (2018).
10. The name of the app alludes to the Greek symbol delta ($\Delta\delta$) that is used to signify difference and change in mathematics.
11. For example - On the company website, Google Playstore description and in interviews by the founder and upper level executives with journalists.

12. One thing that was not mentioned in this discussion, despite being a significant social factor, is caste. In India, caste-based discrimination mediates interactions over dating apps. The ability (and often requirement) to filter users based on their caste and sub-castes has been one of the defining features of online matrimonial platforms in India such as *Bharat Matrimony*, *Shaadi.com*, *Tamil Matrimony* etc. The emphasis caste affiliations in the online matching process of these websites/apps is a continuation of the format followed by matrimonial columns in print newspapers in the country where the format followed in most ads is to begin by identifying one's family by caste and sub-sect (Ramakrishnan 2012). Most dating platforms do not have caste-based identifiers as their primary filtration mechanisms. However, caste continues to exert a force in logics of desirability on these apps because ideas such as skin color, backgrounds, and names act as caste markers.

13. This concept was directly adopted from the structure of Truly Madly, the dating app company that incubated Delta and provided Delta with an initial technical scaffold for their app. For instance, the algorithmic matching process for Delta is built on the Skeleton of Truly Madly's recommendation engine.

14. After nearly a century of being used as a slur, the term 'queer' was reclaimed as a positive overarching identity category as part of community building efforts during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. During this time 'queer' grew to signal a growing movement calling for greater inclusivity and social, legal, healthcare rights people identifying as marginalized because of their sexuality. A core component of this movement was a critique of the value monolithic sexual and gender identities (Stein and Plummer 1994).

15. Going into detail about the exact content of these video ad plans is not possible within the paper to respect the privacy of the organization and the marketing plans shared in good faith.

16. Translation from Hindi: "Until now."

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