Enclosing Intimate Possibility:
Production Cultures in Dating and Ancillary App Industries in India

by

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Dedication

To Amma and Baba

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Abstract

This project considers how ideas about intimate possibility are imagined, navigated, and contained by producers operating within India's dating and dating adjacent app industries. Currently, extended research on dating and dating adjacent apps tends to focus on user experiences and app interface dynamics. Providing an alternative viewpoint, I situate my analysis within the production cultures of a nascent dating app corporate ecosystem in order to better map the emergent, complex, and contradictory ways the logics of digitally mediated intimacy get reified and adapted within a particular regional context. By situating my fieldwork within the corporate media/tech industry in India I show how some of the frictions inherent in the process of rapid national digitization get worked through in this emergent site.

Under the backdrop of a rapidly digitizing nation (India), dating and dating adjacent apps, I argue, tend to foreclose the possibilities of many forms of intimate connection in order to create 'new' zones (both digital and physical) for intimate encounters. To this end, I present three case studies. Each case examines production practices of app companies within a different frame of reference: starting with cultural politics of gender, moving on to imaginaries of queerness, and finally ending in an examination of the politics of space. Observations I make in these cases are based on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in large technology hubs in India (e.g. Delhi, Bangalore, Mumbai) conducted between 2016 and 2019.

In the first case study, I explore outreach and branding efforts of two large dating app companies (Tinder and TrulyMadly) as they approach the Indian userbase for the first time to illustrate how corporate narratives of appropriate forms of desire and desirability are highly

gendered and framed around an urgent need for safety and protection of middle-class women from lower class men. Additionally, I look at how discourse delineating who these apps are for dynamically adapts to user demands. In the second case study I take an in-depth look at the production decisions of India's first "homegrown" queer dating app – Delta. Here, I analyze how the malleable, transient, fluid qualities of queerness intersect with the pressures of funding, norms of digital design, and consequences of criminalization of homosexuality in the region. In the third case study, I center questions of space and place briefly highlighted in previous chapters through a close examination of online 'love hotel' aggregation app StayUncle as a way to highlight the considerations involved in coordinating the transition from communication online to embodied intimate experiences offline in India, particularly in smaller towns. Doing so, I reference the ways in which private spaces for intimate contact are curated and made visible to the public through digital platforms like StayUncle. Throughout the project, I articulate how regional conditions influence the complex and contradictory approaches app producers take.

Chapter 1
Introduction

On July 27th, 2016 the most widely read magazine in India (*India Today*) ran a cover story that declared that the nation was on the verge of a "sex revolution". The issue was titled "Happy Love: How mobile dating applications are transforming romance and relationships in India". The pixelated image of the two figures kissing on the cover was made up of tiny photos of smartphone screens and logos of dating app companies. Within the issue, journalist Damayanti Datta wrote about how the "business of love" was exploding in India, using phrases like "land of creeps" and "triumph of choice" to highlight the risks and rewards of a growing number of dating apps that had recently become available in the country (Datta, 2016).

Figure 1 - Cover of July 27th, 2016 publication of India Today.

I was drawn to this image when thinking about how to summarize this project[1], because the words app, mobile, transforming and India emphasized on the magazine cover seemed like they could also function as keywords for this dissertation. The emphasis on the word *app* flagged the specificity of the phenomenon of an "app" as a particular kind of digital platform rooted in mobile phone cultures. The language of transformation, although hyperbolic, captured a sense of anticipation that often shrouds media discourse about digital technologies. And the positioning of the discussion about "H*app*y Love" within the regional context of India, captured the importance of situating accounts of technologies within grounded cultural contexts.

In 2016, the year the *India Today* issue in question was released, internationally popular dating app Tinder reported that among all the global markets in which the app was available, it was in India that they saw the highest average number of messages exchanged per match (Hindustan Times, 2019). In competition with Tinder[2] were a group of India specific dating apps such as Woo, Vee, Two Mangoes, Cogxio, Twango, DesiCrush, Aisle and TrulyMadly that had all launched between 2013 and 2016. These region-specific dating platforms framed themselves as local alternatives to international dating apps like Tinder, OkCupid and Hinge.

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[1] This project grew from a desire to understand how the increasing availability of social and connective apps are changing the ways in which people think about love, sex, and desire. At a personal level, it was a way to make sense of how the connection and belonging I had with friends, family, and lovers back home in India, was institutionally shaped by the many digital platforms we depended on to 'stay in touch'. Having never actively used a dating app before, despite being surrounded by friends that did, made the phenomenon of apps associated with dating feel distant enough from my everyday lived experience to seem endlessly fascinating.

[2] Tinder was not the only international dating app operating here, and neither is the list of India specific apps here exhaustive. For example gay male dating app *Grindr* and *Blued* are popular among the LGBTQ community in India. I go into more detail about the contours of the dating app ecosystem later in the introduction.

Unlike matrimony sites such as Shaadi.com and BharatMatrimony, that had been hugely successful in India since the early 2000s (Titzmann, 2013; Titzmann, 2015), dating app companies rarely, if ever, stated that marriage was the primary purpose of their platform. Like matrimony sites that saw a boom in the early 2000s, dating app use has grown rapidly in the country from around 2014. As of 2020, the online dating industry in India is quickly becoming a notable economic contributor to the nations broader digital economy and is estimated to be worth approximately $323 million USD (United States Dollars) (N.K, 2020). Mirroring the growth of dating apps, were a number of ancillary digital platforms operating in the sphere of aiding intimate encounters. Examples of these include online sex toy stores (such as LuvTreats and IMbesharam) and "love hotel aggregation apps" that allowed unmarried couples to find safe hotel rooms where they could be 'close' to one another.

Notably, the year 2016 was not the first time that *India Today* magazine had announced that intimacy was going to be transformed by telecommunication technology. Fourteen years before its 'Happy Love' issue, the magazine had heralded a similar transformation of intimacy by mobile SMS (Short Messaging Service). The October 14th, 2002 cover of India Today titled "Love Sex and SMS" lauded SMS, that had just then become a popular mode of communication as a result of overall mobile phone growth in the country, as responsible for a "revolution" in how Indians imagined and experienced love. Writing within the cover story suggested that SMS technology was risky because it was a "wired Viagra" that could lead to problems like "indecent proposals" yet also might create "a sense of greater liberation and daring" among young people (Vasudev, 2002).

Although the 2002 and 2016 covers discuss the implications of two very different kinds of digital technologies, they are strikingly similar in the tone they use while discussing them. In

both cases, the possible transformation that technologies might bring were characterized as inherently oppositional alternatives between either liberatory freedom ("triumph of choice", "greater sense of liberation and daring") or dangerous immorality ("indecent proposals", "land of creeps"). Comparing the two cover stories, published fourteen years apart, emphasizes how the language of emergent "revolution" gets repeatedly invoked in conjunction with the latest communication technology to evoke a sense of potentiality. In this project, I take seriously the fact that popular discourse tends to frame moments of technological change as clean breaks or ruptures. At the same time, by adopting what Kumar & Parameswaran (2018) term a "historicized approach" (p. 347) to cultural power, I attempt to push beyond such dominant frames to offer an alternative account of emergence that is focused on the messy interplay between technology companies, widely held assumptions about intimacy, and reactionary visions of a digital nation.

In this dissertation, I argue that "intimacy" and "Indianness" are conceptualized by people within the dating app ecosystem as problematic affects that need to be carefully managed by technological infrastructures and corporate systems. I show that the management of intimate possibility takes place at multiple levels - at a technical level through app design, at a marketing level through advertising campaigns and at an industry level through launches of new products. Across these levels app companies tried to (re)assure users of the 'safety' of their platform, even though who is deserving of safety and who one needs to be kept safe from remains either unclear or strategically malleable.

To make sense of the many boundaries created and negotiated by associated app producers[3] broadly operating within India's dating app ecosystem I employ Andrejevic's (2007) concept of *digital enclosure*. I use the term digital enclosures[4] as a metaphor to refer to the new kinds of boundaries surrounding us because of an increased interlinkage between physical and virtual space. In doing so, I suggest that dating and dating adjacent apps tend to foreclose the possibilities of many forms of intimate connection in order to create 'new' zones (both digital and physical) for intimate encounters. For companies, part of the purpose of circumscribing intimate possibility is to ensure profitability of their digital product and demonstrate their success through industry metrics (e.g. download numbers). Another part is to effectively adapt to region specific socioeconomic conditions (e.g. rapid digitization, moral panics surrounding technology use, legal changes in queer rights, growth of Tier 2 and Tier-3 cities[5]).

Additionally, I observe that even as app producers and production systems worked to neatly define, contain, and sanitize the intimate possibilities offered by their platforms, they go about trying to achieve this through processes that are messy, complex, and contradictory. Contributing to the ambivalent and dynamic approaches app producers take are the regional conditions noted above. The roots of several of these regional are tied most immediately to the sociohistorical conjuncture of the last seven years, and more broadly to the nation's past as a British colony. I say the last seven years, because 2014 was a pivotal year for Indian politics and technology developments.

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[3] While I attend to patterns of distribution and usage these are not my focus of this project.

[4] At times I use 'enclosures' and 'digital enclosures' interchangeably.

[5] Tiers are a ranking system used by the Indian government to classify cities. Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities are smaller cities compared to the eight large Tier 1 cities that are commonly known as metros.

In 2014, the general election led to Narendra Modi's BJP (Bharatiya Janta Party) government coming into power for its first term, the country became the fastest growing smartphone market in Asia (Amberber, 2014), and Tinder became a worldwide cultural phenomenon (Flanagan, 2014). In India, the period between 2014 and 2020 was marked by significant developments in digital technology infrastructures and usage patterns (e.g. growing internet penetration, smartphone access and app economies) as well as immense sociopolitical shifts (e.g. decriminalization of homosexuality, normalization of right-wing Hindutva authoritarianism, implementation of a biometric identity database[6], and contentious changes to how citizenship is judged by the state[7]).

A report analyzing digital adoption across seventeen maturing and emerging economies found that India was digitizing faster than any other countries, apart from Indonesia (McKinsey Global Institute, 2019, p. 2). At the same time, declining room for the media, civil society and academic opposition under the Modi government has led to the country being judged as one of fastest autocratizing nations in the world, according to multiple independent think tanks (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2021; Varieties of Democracy, 2021).

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[6] India's biometric citizen identification project, also known as the Aadhaar project aims to link the biometric data of all citizens with a twelve-digit unique number. The project is presented by its implementing governmental authority (UIDAI) as a one stop solution for equitable access to state welfare programs. On the other hand, citizen right groups, think tanks, and civil society organizations argue that the initiative is an ethically ambiguous state sanctioned violation of constitutionally protected rights. These organizations have repeatedly highlighted privacy concerns and possible security breaches in court cases against the program. See Ajana (2013) and P. Singh (2019) and Sriraman (2018) for a more in-depth discussion.

7 The 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) alongside the government's intent to expand the National Register of Citizens (NRC) from Assam to the rest of India creates a legal framework that is likely to deprive Muslims and other marginalized religious groups of their citizenship.

As ideas about national belonging narrow, "who one loves" and "how one loves" have become contentious and political questions. For example, 'Love Jihad' a right-wing Hindutva conspiracy theory stating that Muslim men are tricking Hindu women into falling in love and marrying them in order to force female conversions to Islam has been used as justification by the government to change marriage laws in ways that place increased scrutiny on Hindu-Muslim marriages (Biswas, 2020). The 'Love Jihad' conspiracy first gained nationwide traction during the 2014 election (R. Nair & Daniel, 2014) and since then the new laws it inspired has led to the arrest of several couples trying to have interfaith marriages in Uttar Pradesh (a state in northern India) (Biswas, 2020). The 'Love Jihad' conspiracy spread through hashtags on social media and misinformation campaigns on WhatsApp that were supported by local right-wing politicians (Bhardwaj, 2021). Just this one example demonstrates the interplay of religious, digital, gender, and political concerns at stake in questions surrounding where the boundaries of 'appropriate' forms of intimacy in India lie, and whose intimacies are bound in ways that are recognized as 'legitimate' by the state. Set against the backdrop of such developments, my analysis focuses on three media/tech industry case studies that capture important moments in the elaboration of technology and the self.

The first case study in this dissertation explores how ideas about desire and desirability get refracted and (re)imagined through evaluations of appropriate forms of gendered self-expression by executives at two large dating app companies (Tinder, TrulyMadly) trying to "connect" with a new user base. The second examines how the malleable, transient, and fluid qualities of queerness intersect with funding pressures and norms of good app design within a dating app startup (Delta) driven by people trying to create a platform that is both "queer" and "Indian". The third analyzes how issues of access to places where one can be physically intimate

creates new kinds of digital infrastructures to support the process of transitioning from meeting someone online to having an in-person encounter with them in the physical world. It traces how this need, alongside a series of fortuitous events led to a unique kind of intimate app - love hotel aggregators (StayUncle) - becoming a viral sensation. I develop each of these case studies using a combination of postcolonial, queer, and feminist lenses to make sense of ethnographic data gathered over eight months of fieldwork in Bangalore, Delhi, and Mumbai between 2016 and 2019.

In all three case studies, I pay particular attention to the ways in which gender dynamics, sexual orientations, ideas about regional belonging, and realities of built environments are negotiated by the digital corporations that are the focus of each study. The relative nascency of the corporate space in which my ethnographic research is situated means that I offer a more uncertain view of affairs in comparison with accounts about well-established media industries (e.g. film, television, advertising) and historical centers of digital technology production (e.g. Silicon Valley). This mixture of promise and tenuousness aligns with what most players in India's dating app ecosystem experience today. At the same time, the stories told in this dissertation - of organizations in their journeys navigating the boundaries of fluid desires in an ever-evolving socio technological terrain - are at once specific to the tech centers of urban India in which I spent time, and generalizable as a fundamental condition of intimacy in times of fast flowing information and uncertain futures. Some globally relevant themes that emerge are to do with concerns about how to remain at the forefront of youth culture, navigate the opportunities arising from the hybridization of digital and physical space, and deal with users who resist an app's intended use.

Roadmap of the introduction

The structure of the rest of the introduction is as follows - I briefly outline what I mean by the dating app ecosystem in India and elaborate on the scale at which digital transformation is taking place. I then explain my understanding of the term "intimacy" and my approach towards it as a phenomenon that is simultaneously institutional, embodied, and mundane. I observe that underlying these three characteristics of intimacy are issues to do with how intimacy gets bound, particularly in relation to ways in which digital communication technologies mediate intimate connections.

As a way to work through the borders and boundaries of intimate possibility, I suggest that the concept of digital enclosures might be a productive model through which to explore the digital and physical interlinkages of app mediated intimacies. Additionally, I consider here how regional specificity is crucial to understanding the ways in which digital enclosures work differently in different contexts. I elaborate on the intersection of intimacy X enclosure as generative heuristic to frame an analysis of dating app production cultures. The "X" here captures the many ways in which ideas about intimacies and issues of digital enclosure[8] can intersect. I outline how each chapter focuses on a different register of intimacy X enclosure (i.e. marketing and corporate branding, app design, built environments) to reveal different kinds of complex and contradictory issues app producers grapple with. Following this, I detail the sites, materials, and approaches that I used during fieldwork. Finally, I chart the structure of the rest of the dissertation by providing an overview of the chapters that are to follow.

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[8] My decision to refer to this relationship through a symbol as opposed to a word is elaborated on later in the introduction, and again in the conclusion.

Mapping the terrain of dating and ancillary app industries in India

The number of smartphones per 100 people in India more than quadrupled from 2014 to 2018 and continues to rise (McKinsey Global Institute, 2019). The country has also seen a 95% decline in data costs during the same period (McKinsey Global Institute, 2019). This decline in data costs is in large part due to new private sector mobile network operators such as Reliance JIO who, backed by state sponsorship, have created a highly competitive market by offering free mobile data packages to draw consumers (Economic Times, 2018; Deck, 2020). Given these broad shifts, it is perhaps unsurprising that India has emerged as the world's fastest-growing market for smartphone apps, experiencing a 190% growth in app downloads between 2016 and 2019, compared to just 5% in the US or even 80% in China (App Annie, 2020). As the images below show, the consequences of the rapid push to digitize can be seen and felt across a variety of physical spaces and media products in India.

Figure 2 - Sign in a shopping complex in Delhi leading people to store where they can sign up for a smartphone data plan.

Figure 3 - A front page cover of a leading national newspaper taken up by an ad from a telecom provider.

The size of India's market alongside its rapid digitization has pushed global technology giants such as Google, Facebook, Microsoft, and Netflix to launch tailored services aimed at Indian consumers (McKinsey Global Institute, 2019: pp. 33). For instance, in 2019 Netflix announced a new mobile phone only streaming plan for India priced at approximately $2.5 per month (Netflix, 2019; Warren, 2019). Announcing the launch of the plan, Netflix's Director of Product Innovation Ajay Arora released a statement saying the Indian users watched more on mobile than their members anywhere else in the world (Netflix, 2019).

Within these broader developments in the digital landscape, dating app use in India has skyrocketed over the last five years. Global mobile analytics firm AppsFlyer (2019) released results from a survey of Indian smartphone users at the Mobile Attribution and Marketing Analytics (MAMA) conference in New Delhi in 2019 that found that Tinder and Netflix were the two most popular apps in India, as measured by in-app revenue. National magazine publications report that executives overseeing dating apps estimate that the value of the dating app market in

the country will reach $100 million in the next five to eight years (Jha, 2019). And a report released in May 2019 noted that there was a 40% increase in searches related to “dating” compared to the previous year (Outlook India, 2019). Together these sources point to a rapidly growing dating app industry in India.

Globally, the emergence of mobile dating applications can be traced back to the launch of *Grindr*, a gay male geo-social app launched in March 2009 (Vernon, 2010). By 2011, Grindr’s user base had expanded to India where it faced competition from Planet Romeo (a web based gay male dating website popular since the early 2000s) which had recently transitioned to a mobile avatar and *Scruff*, another international gay male geo-social dating app. All three platforms were shaped by affordances of smartphone-based technologies that allowed features such as swiping (right or left) through profiles and setting radii to find new matches. By allowing users to move through digital space while having potential matches provided to them based on their specific physical ‘location’, these gay dating apps operated in a “hybrid space” where digital location was continually interacting with physical movements (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012; Miles, 2017). In other words, a sense of spatial hybridity experienced in interactions through geolocative dating apps is premised on the affordances of smartphone technology that allows people the ability to coordinate and communicate with each other while continuously mapping their relative locations. During this time dating sites specifically for women seeking women remained limited, and apps for lesbian women such as *Her* never gained significant traction in the country.

Coming back to major developments in the online mobile phone based dating landscape - Tinder launched in 2012, three years after Grindr, employing similar design features but targeting a heterosexual audience instead of a homosexual one. Like Grindr, Tinder’s user base

quickly spread across the globe. For instance, in 2014, the Indian edition of the *Wall Street Journal* published a commentary section observing how Indians were "ditching" their blackberries to get on iPhones that supported Tinder (The Wall Street Journal, 2014). During the period of Tinder's global expansion between 2013 and 2014, numerous hyper local India focused dating apps – TrulyMadly, DesiCrush, Woo, Aisle, Vee, Twango – were launched (often by non-resident Indian entrepreneurs). These apps targeted the country's expanding smartphone userbase and all claimed that they held the (only) key to what Indians were looking for in love. Between 2016 and 2019 local Indian apps like Aisle, TrulyMadly and Woo remained steady contenders to Tinder in India, while others such as Twango and DesiCrush slipped off the public radar.

Also worth noting here are three important international heterosexual dating apps, beyond Tinder, operating in India - Bumble, OkCupid and Hinge. Bumble, a woman centric heterosexual dating app where only female users can contact male users they match with, brought on actress Priyanka Chopra as an investor and Indian brand ambassador when it launched in the region in 2018. The Bollywood turned Hollywood star made several high-profile appearances at Bumble launch parties in cities like Delhi and Mumbai alongside her new husband Nick Jonas in the winter of 2018 (Harper's Bazaar, 2018). Hinge, a dating platform specializing in "long term relationships" and advertising itself as the "anti-Tinder" was gradually making in-roads in India when it was acquired by the Match Group (that also owns Tinder) in June 2018 (Perez, 2019a). OkCupid, an established online dating platform that first launched its site in 2004, started advertising specifically to its Indian audience in 2019 as part of a broader push by the Match Group as a whole in the region (Perez, 2019b). Of the three companies listed here, Bumble is the only one that is *not* owned by the Match Group (partly because of its founder Whitney Wolfe's

dramatic fallout with Tinder where she originally was a high-ranking executive[9]). While apps like OkCupid, Bumble, Tinder, TrulyMadly and Woo have LGBTQ users, I classify them as *heterosexual* dating apps because the companies primarily represent themselves as apps for heterosexual users and this is how the platforms are framed in popular culture.

I detail the intricacies of the queer dating app landscape in greater detail in the second case study of the dissertation that centers around the launch of India's first "homegrown" dating app targeting the LGBTQ community (Delta). At this point, what I would like to highlight is that while gay male dating platforms like Grindr and Planet Romeo were popular in the country before apps like Tinder, there was negligible corporate level investment by international gay dating apps into expanding in India, and none by local dating apps. It was only in 2018, around the time that Section 377 (a law criminalizing homosexuality) was repealed by the Supreme Court, that queer dating apps began investing in features targeting non-heterosexual users and advertising to queer communities.

In addition to the kinds of dating apps discussed above, I include ancillary app industries such as online sex toy stores and 'love hotel' aggregation apps my imagination of the broader Indian dating app ecosystem. Although clearly not dating platforms, I suggest that these often hard to classify ancillary industries are useful examples or cases to understand emerging digital cultures. Online sex toy stores that sell a combination of wellness products, erotica, and fetish accessories such as IMbesharam, ThatsPersonal and LuvTreats are predicted to see significant growth as a result of a national level boom in e-commerce (Khandekar, 2020; TechSci Research, 2020). While the dissertation does not include a specific case study on online sex toy stores,

[9] See more about the drama surrounding the fallout here - Domonoske (2018); Perez, (2018a)

interviews with people working within this space were used to inform claims made about trends regarding sex and the promises of technologies. What is discussed in the dissertation are 'love hotel' aggregation apps, a relatively new genre of digital product that is based on helping unmarried couples access hotel rooms vetted as "safe" from judgement and policing. The first of these apps, *StayUncle,* launched in 2015 and is the focus on the third case study in the dissertation. By including these ancillary industries into the projects imagination of a dating app ecosystem in many ways, I blur the boundary of what counts as a "dating app". This kind of blurring is something that can be see *within* centers of dating app production as well. For instance, *Bumble,* an app that is clearly presented in popular discourse as a dating app in direction competition with Tinder, has introduced modes for Business Networking (Bumble Biz) and finding platonic friends (Bumble BFF). Similarly, queer Indian dating app Delta initially launched its product with a social forum within the app for queer people to connect over common interests.

Intimacy as institutional, embodied, and ordinary

Desire, desirability, love, sexual expression, sexual activity, friendship, familiarity, companionship, yearning, connection, proximity, acceptance - each of these words came up (in interviews and secondary research) as descriptors of what platforms within the dating app ecosystem were trying to provide to their users. Early on in the project, "intimacy" became a natural catch-all to capture these varied terms together. Within academia, intimacy has been the object of significant theorization, yet it remains an elusive concept. The term seems to encapsulate multiple meanings that morph based on the context. Scholars have linked the word 'intimacy' with multiple prefixes in their attempts to home in on the nature of the particular kind

of intimacy they were interested in exploring. For instance, at the intersection writing on intimacy and digital technology alone, some terms that have been coined are - glocal intimacies (Cabañes & Uy-Tioco, 2020), virtual intimacy (McGlotten, 2013; Wilding, 2006), mobile intimacies (Hjorth & Lim, 2012; Shah, 2015), networked intimacy (Chambers, 2017), haptic intimacy (Richardson & Keogh, 2017; Richardson, 2020), mediated intimacies (Attwood et al., 2017), cold intimacies (Illouz, 2007) and techno-intimacy (Patel, 2017).

Instead of adding another prefixed version of intimacy to the already long list, I decided to locate my approach within established scholarship, some of which is listed above. Thus, I approach intimacy as a structure of feeling (Williams, 1979, pp. 156-72) that is simultaneously embodied (deeply sensorial rooted in the body and its relationship with its environment), linked to institutional structures of power (e.g. nation state, urban architecture, colonialism), and cultivated through everyday activities. Next, I expand on some issues worth considering while approaching intimacy as institutional, embodied and ordinary in the context of the digital present.

Intimacy as institutional

Experiences of intimacy tend to be researched at the level of individual[10] relationships, but it is worth remembering that imaginaries of what counts as intimate are shaped by institutional forces. Media studies scholarship exploring intimacy at the level of individuals often draw their intellectual roots from sociological theory by Giddens (1990/1992) and Beck &

[10] There is a vast amount of empirical and theoretical insight that has come from ethnographically oriented research studying intimacy solely at the interpersonal level. In emphasizing intimacy as institutional I do not intend to minimize this body of work.

Beck-Gernsheim (1998) who argue that changing social structures in western Europe around the time of the industrial revolution, such as the dissolution of traditional kin networks, birthed the modern notion of "intimacy" as a new form of relationality. In this new form of intimate relationality, social ideals of duty and familial or social obligation were replaced by a desire to satisfy the needs of individual participants in an intimate relationship.

Yet as Lowe (2015) points out, the emergence of modernity as a conceptual category is bound to the denial of intimacies of the subaltern. In this way modern conceptions of intimacy are not restricted to the domain of individual relationality but rather tied to colonial legacies of slavery and capital. Taking a more expansive account of intimacy, that is thinking intimacy something that goes beyond interpersonal relationships, allows scholars to explore dynamics of nationhood and globalization through the lens of intimacy. For example, Abu-Lughod (2008) explores the formation of Egyptian national identity by drawing on Herzfeld's (1996/ 2014) notion of cultural intimacy (as the shared aspects of identity that those outside a cultural group look at as embarrassing or funny but provides those occupying the group a shared sense of identity and closeness with each other). Relatedly, in their recent edited collection on mobile media and social intimacies in Asia, (Cabañes & Uy-Tioco (2020) use the term 'glocal intimacies' to refer to the imaginaries and practices that have arisen from a negotiation between everyday life and global modernity. They observe how "the most private forms of intimacy are always imbricated in broader social dynamics" (p. 2). My writing aligns with Cabañes & Uy-Tioco's (2020) perspective here and extends it by approaching an understanding of intimacy from an industry point of view (rather than user perspectives) within a South Asian (as opposed to East Asian) context.

Embodied intimacies in a digital world

Even as imaginaries of intimacy are shaped by institutions and can operate as institutional forces in of themselves, we experience and feel intimacy through our bodies. We don't simply think about intimacy, we know what it feels like in our skin and our bones. In other words, intimacy can be considered as an affect deeply rooted in sensory experiences, or as (Pink, 2015b) puts it - our lived experiences of feeling, connection, care, longing, and desire are tied to our physical senses.

Because of the mundane, routinized contact phones have with our bodies, there is a sense of intimacy that develops between us, our phones, and the apps they hold. Richardson (2020) calls this a haptic intimacy "that renders the mobile touchscreen an object of tactile and kinesthetic familiarity, a sensory knowing-ness of the fingers that correlates with what appears on the small screen" (p.168). On a similar vein, in her book on conducting sensory ethnography Pink (2015a) elaborates the qualities of haptic intimacy in detail explaining that the touch screens that surround us "do not just demand a more embodied or sensory mode of interaction: they also alert us to the sensoriality of our embodied and affective engagement with media in new ways." (p.6)

Although I do not examine haptic intimacies in detail in the dissertation, recognizing the routinization of sensory modes of engagement with mobile phones was formative in how I approached understanding the *consequences* of app production and design decisions. For instance, I began thinking about the gestures offered to us on apps to sift through people presented as potential romantic or sexual interests (e.g. swiping, scrolling) as significant production decisions. While I had initially simply recognized that the behind-the-scenes technology decisions regarding these dynamics informed how we navigated the platform, I began

to consider also how those gestures took on a broader significance as expressions of choice more broadly in the physical world. In the next chapter I note how the haptic intimacy of a 'right swipe' is leveraged in Tinder's advertisements and marketed as a signifier of agency and freedom to make decisions as a young person in India.

Theorizing the ways in which boundaries between bodies and built environments have become highly permeable as a result of the digitally networked worlds we inhabit, Smith (2016) describes the body as a "border site where data is simultaneously emitted and leveraged" (p. 110). He argues that in the contemporary world our bodies have become increasingly leaky as the surveillance capacities of networked technologies transform bodies into walking "sensor platforms" that leak a "disembodied exhaust" of analyzable and commodifiable data (pp. 115-135). For Smith (2016), on the one hand data based visibility (where impressions of selfhood slip away from our bodies to bordering virtual networks) can make us feel a general sense of performative fatigue. At the same time, the labor of creating abstract representations of our selfhood in the digital domain can be playful and fulfilling. The degree of play and fulfillment of course being mediated by one's digital literacy, which is in turn influenced by social status.

Queer studies scholars have been particularly attuned to the consequences of the kind of permeability noted above, pointing out that intimate desire can itself feel both playful and oppressive in our bodies and that this duality translates to interactions in the digital sphere (McGlotten, 2013). In the Indian context, increasing ease of access to virtual spaces as a result of rising internet and mobile phone penetration has allowed people to escape from some of the constraints commonly placed on queer bodies. For example, Shah (2015) notes that "there is an element of surreptitious pleasure, of illicit connections, of anonymous and hidden subcultures that accompanies the associations of queerness and mobile phones in India." (p. 277) The

"surreptitious pleasure, illicit connections, and anonymity" afforded mobile phone based digital platforms, is at least in part a consequence of those platforms (whether by design or happenstance) providing an *enclosure* for queer users, protecting their bodies from the gaze of an authoritarian and antagonistic state.

At the same time, even as digital technologies (particularly mobile phones) extend the reach of our bodies, they also limit potential for transgression by making our desires easier to surveil. Female bodies have been the objects of particular scrutiny in India, especially in terms of when and how women use mobile phones. There have been multiple bans on mobile phone use by unmarried women in Indian villages (Reuters, 2012), and recently there have been debates about whether college institutions "can" or "should" ban cellphone use for all women if the college suspect the women are engaging in "risky behavior" (Bhandari & Kovacs, 2021). Women negotiating these pressures in their everyday life are both aware and articulate about the ways in which mobile phones can both limit and constrain intimate possibility for them. Doron (2013) writes about how women in mid-sized north Indian cities speak extensively about the complicated relationship they have with their phones – considering mobile phones to be both tools that extend their agency by allowing them to communicate to others outside the home and devices that circumscribe their freedom by allowing family members to always reach them and monitor their location.

As the Indian government's "Digital India Campaign"[11] firmly establishes "digitality" as a core component of the country's national identity. Dasgupta (2017; 2018) notes that while

[11] This campaign was launched by the Indian government's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology in 2015. With the slogan "Power to Empower" the stated objective of the program is to increase Internet infrastructures and access and (in conjunction with other government schemes) move to delivering all government schemes digitally.

certain kinds of transgressive desires are brought within the folds of Digital India, many others are relegated as dangerous and therefore excluded. He observes that among the kinds of bodies excluded and judged to be "too queer" to be included within the national plan for a digital future are not just bodies with same sex desires, but bodies that are low caste, Muslim bodies, 'foreign' bodies, and bodies that don't ascribe to neoliberal modes of consumption (Dasgupta, 2018, p. 4). Taking seriously concerns surrounding how certain kinds of bodies and forms of embodied desires get defined as dangerous, I carefully consider how app producers come to make decisions about who to exclude and who to invite onto their platforms. Here, I pay particular attention to the ways in which the embodied knowledge of upper-level executives (e.g. CEOs and co-founders) inform their decision-making processes.

For most of the dissertation I tend to focus on the ways in which gender and class status imbricate corporate imaginaries of the intended use of digital platforms. Two identity markers that I consider extremely important but do not analyze in much detail are caste and religion. This is partly because dating and dating adjacent app producers rarely if ever addressed issues of caste and religion even when I explicitly asked how these dynamics influenced their decision making on the app. The most common response I got to this line of questioning was either that this was a "user issue" and that their platforms were built "fairly". While I am certainly critical of this positionality, I do believe that the resistance to acknowledge or address these issues requires a deeper more targeted enquiry into class and religious politics that lies beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Inspired by Diprose's (1994/ 2002) provocation in *The Bodies of Women* where she writes - "What you can become is limited by the social history of your body" (p. 15). I show how "being Indian" gets claimed as a kind of "embodied knowledge" by dating and dating adjacent

app executives to gain material resources (e.g. funding, legitimacy) and relied upon to intuitively guide "big picture" strategy decisions. By embodied knowledge I mean knowledge we create and embody through experiential ways of knowing (Barbour, 2002/2016). Since those making these big-picture decisions often occupy bodies that are upper caste, upper class, educated, and privileged they often struggle with making decisions that consider the intimate experiences of Indian bodies that are not like theirs. Thus, even as they leverage their embodied knowledge, they grapple with the predispositions those embodied of knowing ways bring. Importantly, these observations are not things that new or surprising to those working within the digital app industry but were often articulated by executives as issues they have to grapple with every day at work.

Intimacy as ordinary

There has been a push within media studies to recognize that new technology platforms do not necessarily suddenly restructure experiences but rather the use of digital devices tends to seep into our everyday routines, gradually morphing our rituals. Mapping the ways in which intimacy is mundane and mediated, Mankekar (2000, 2004) explores how everyday television viewing in the 1990s influenced Indian experiences of and ideas about the erotic. Based on approximately a decade of fieldwork Mankekar explores the ways in which the (then) new medium of television played a key role in configuring a sense of Indian national identity. She observes that the daily eroticized pleasures of buying, gazing, and browsing commodities on television defined the possibilities of love, romance, and family life for a generation of middle-class women in Northern India. Importantly, these new notions of intimate possibility were not

suddenly redefined. Rather, it was the ordinary, mundane routines of television viewing that slowly cultivated a new structure of feeling in the lives of the women she spoke to.

One of the ways in which I take up questions about the ordinariness of intimacy in subsequent chapters is by exploring how apps work to routinize the use of their platforms. For instance, Tinder's effort between 2016 and 2019 to frame themselves as a "young person's app" involved a significant push to try to make the use of Tinder a part of the everyday routines of a college aged person. Another way in which I approach ordinariness is by noting that for people working within tech industries, the processes of app production are simply part of their daily routines. Therefore, I closely look at how app founders in particular describe their journey establishing their platforms and managing the dynamics of their upper-level management positions.

This interest in the minutia of production helps me paint a detailed picture of how apps develop. For instance, in the second case I note the unexpected forms of daily labor that community managers at LGBTQ+ dating app Delta undertake such as sifting through "dick pics" to weed out "unsafe" users[12]. And in the third case study of the dissertation, I tell the story of how a highly successful digital startup, StayUncle, began when its founder was bored in his previous job at a fertilizer manufacturer corporation and found a free domain name (*StayUncle*) on GoDaddy.com when browsing the web while at work.

In summary, I understand intimacy as a phenomenon that is influenced by institutional powers/histories, experienced through our bodies, and tied to everyday ways of being in the world. Underlying this discussion there are complex issues about how digital technologies

[12] Language used are from interview quotes and are elaborated in more detail in Chapter 3.

inform the *bounds* and *boundaries* of intimate possibility. I use the word *bounds* to refer to the restrictions around the kinds of intimacies that are considered socially permissible. Digital technologies often become systems of surveillance that tighten these bounds by making non-normative bodies and desires more visible to both social and state structures. The carcerality implicit in the word "bound" captures the restrictive quality of intimate engagement here. On the other hand the word *boundary,* while certainly having an element of restriction also signals the protective quality of borders. The boundaries between digital and physical spaces, and the boundaries we put up in relationships can function as a form of safety, allowing potential for greater closeness. In other words, we look towards boundaries for our intimacies, to help sustain them.

The question that arises for me in this project then, is how to make sense of bounds and boundaries of intimate possibility at the site of a particular kind of digital platform (dating and dating adjacent apps). The framework of digital enclosures became a way for me to begin to answer this question. In the next section I expand on the idea of digital enclosures. I then consider how putting notions of digital enclosure and intimacy in conversation with each other might create a particularly generative lens through which to approach the complexity of production cultures within India's dating app ecosystem.

Enclosures in a digital world

The central theme in the idea of 'digital enclosure' is not that technologies are inherently invasive (though they certainly can be), but rather that living in a digital world requires us to pay attention to regimes of control, to think of who sets the terms of entry into digital platforms and what arrangements of data exchange are tacitly established as a result. In their paper on *Data*

cultures of mobile dating and hook-up apps, Albury et al. (2017) point out that the idea of digital enclosures emphasizes the "the ongoing importance of structures of ownership and control over productive resources" (p. 5) within the dating app industry. Additionally, in their writing about digital platform cultures scholars such as Jackson & Kuehn (2016), Lievrouw & Loader (2020) and Sadowski (2020) all emphasize that the concept of "enclosure" has tremendous contemporary relevance in terms of understanding how digital systems operate.

Andrejevic (2007) put forward the concept of digital enclosure in the early 2000s partially as a response to the then dominant narrative of 'the digital sublime' (Mosco, 2005) that framed cloud computing and the internet as a space of boundless possibility and limitless freedom. Importantly, the framework of enclosures in a digital world draws our attention to how systems to expropriate information are built into the networked interactive environments that surround us. The normality of networked environments in our everyday life, adds to the concealment of these systems of expropriation. For instance, Andrejevic (2007) gives the example of one of his friends buying a high-definition DVD in the United States and then travelling to Australia. Once in Australia the friend is unable to play the DVD he legally bought, because once he opens his laptop he is automatically signed into a network that locates him and concludes that he is not in the region the DVD is coded for.

Ideas about digital enclosure as taken up in academic writing tend to be rooted in European understanding of land rights and information/intellectual property management. The concept of "enclosure" according to Andrejevic (2007), ties back to the end of the English commons by the land enclosure movement (in the 18th and 19th century). As part of this movement, small landholdings that were earlier common land became consolidated or enclosed into larger farms, whose use was restricted to only the owner(s). Land enclosures in England

marked the end of collective ownership of resources and beginning of their privatization through a freely agreed upon contract. Several centuries later in the early 2000s, scholars such as Boyle (2003) and Schiller (1999) began writing about a “second enclosure movement” through digital capitalism, where information and ideas as opposed to land were beginning to become the object of restrictive scrutiny and subject to strategies that worked to privatize, control and commodify. Andrejevic (2007) frames his contribution of "digital enclosure" as successfully bringing together the spatial features of land enclosures with the intangibility inherent in the "metaphorical processes of information enclosure" (p. 304).

Because of the roots of the model of digital enclosures in a specific European history of land, rights, and property, I believe the model can become globally relevant if applied in conjunction with postcolonial critiques. The usefulness of postcolonial frameworks to understanding media, particularly digital media industries is that they "unsettle dominant (and unmarked) West-centric logics" that have thus far informed "the received history of media as well as the functioning of media" (Shome, 2016: p. 245). I begin to do this here by detailing *why* land policies during colonial rule, and India’s contemporary political environment might lead to different imaginaries of enclosure, than in western countries (whose histories are usually the ones drawn upon when discussing the significance of digital enclosures).

> In his review of two books on environmental history of India, Roosa (1996) writes -
>
> We are accustomed to think of enclosure in a European context; we think of manorial lords throwing up hedges around the villages' of common lands or of the usurpation of cultivated lands for pasturage. We think of the resulting eviction of villagers from the land during the 16th and 17th centuries, what Marx called 'primitive accumulation'. We think of the British parliamentary enclosures of the eighteenth and nineteenth century

when common land was carved up into private plots. We think of the writings of R.H Tawny and E.P Thompson. (p. 285)

While there are certainly connections between enclosure movements in Britain and those taking place in India, the logics of enclosure in a colony such as India differed from that of its British colonizers in at least two notable ways. One, is the sheer scale of the loss of human lives through famines arising from policies of enclosure. An example of this is *The Permanent Settlement of Bengal* that deployed a model of land enclosure in 1793 that led to a shift in the background of the ruling class from local landowning classes to civil servants who had little attachment to their land. This shift led to cash crop farming that caused some of the worst famines of the 19th century (Whitehead, 2010; Sen, 2018).

The second is the difference in public response to the model of enclosure being imposed. For Andrejevic (2007), "The model of England's land enclosure movement is pivotal to critical accounts of capitalism because it illustrates the transformation of violent expropriation into a freely agreed upon contractual arrangement." (p. 302). This was not the case in India where land enclosure was linked to, not privatization, but colonial rule and there was sustained resistance against enclosure efforts that got intertwined with early struggles for India's freedom and self-rule. For example, everyday resistance to the 1878 Act that allowed densely settled forested land to be taken over by the newly established "Forest Department" turned into an organized mass movement during the 1920s Indian non-cooperation movement (Roosa, 1996). Thus what was at stake in land enclosure movements in the context of India was not only the loss of a common resource, but the possibility of self-governance and freedom.

Earlier in this chapter, I pointed out how intimacy is institutional in that ideas about what counts as intimate have been shaped by colonial contexts that have denied the desires of the

subaltern from being recognized by state frameworks. Thinking about how enclosures of intimacy formed during the period of colonial rule morphed in post-independence state systems was a useful way to ground my examination of how dating and dating adjacent app industries responded to the decriminalization of Section 377 (a colonial era rule used to criminalize homosexuality in India).

Writing in the early and mid 2000s on digital media and protest cultures was filled with a sense of optimism in the ability of the Internet to break down state-imposed barriers of control. Developments in the ensuing decade showed how these anticipated changes did not play out as expected. In India, like in many other countries around the world, the state established itself as a player in the digital domain in inextricable and powerful ways. Part of these developments can be attributed to an overall increase in authoritarianism within the governmental regime in India with the election and then re-election of the right wing Hindu nationalist BJP party under Modi in 2014 and again in 2019 (Chatterji et al., 2019). Relatedly, there has been a targeted push by the nation state to invest in infrastructures supporting greater digitization, often through relationships with major private sectors companies such as Reliance Industries. The combination of these forces has resulted in a highly 'walled' internet where access is permitted only to specific (state approved) spheres of digital culture (Mukherjee, 2019)

Here it is worth noting that unlike the US, where the private sector has been central to the rise of big tech platforms, in India the state "functions as an *orchestrator* and an *instrument* in shaping market norms, while selling bandwidth and a developing tech infrastructure [emphasis added]" (Athique & Parthasarathi, 2020, p. 2). In other words, in the Indian context the second enclosure movement of information/intellectual property management through digital capitalism has been possible by a unified state policy, this policy fain legitimacy in the eyes of the public by

offering them greater economic and social development. What this has led to in India is public opinion that considers state surveillance a more desirable alternative to surveillance by private corporations. For instance, Mertia (2021) observes that "supporters of the Aadhaar project often claim that the state is a much more benign collector of data than companies such as Google and Facebook" (p. 14).

In summary, to situate the broader political context of this project I draw on Kaur's (2020) argument that the relationship between the idea of *nation* and the governance of the *state*, is that the *state* frames itself as the sole authority through which the idea of national identity and nationhood gets capitalized as a brand. Kaur (2020) writes –

> The *nation* in this scheme is imagined as a vast enclosure of production, its territory a reserve of untapped natural resources, its population potential producers/consumers of goods and services, and its cultural essence a unique nation brand that distinguishes it from other investment destinations. All of these can be capitalized (transformed) into income-generating assets. The *state* is the authority that manages the income-generating capacity of the national enclosure and holds the power to visualize, brand, legislate, and spatially rearrange the national enclosure as a market-ready investment destination. (p. 13)

To approach the idea of "digital enclosure" without recognizing the west centric assumptions and experiences underpinning the model - takes away some of its potential for providing globally relevant insight. I offer that by considering how regional contexts change the “meaning” of and need for enclosures - it is possible to nuance the model and metaphor of the bounds put upon us because of increased interlinkage between digital and physical spaces. In other words, I suggest that by simply recognizing the colonial histories of enclosure and the regional context of media

development in India over the last three to four decades which laid the groundwork for the country's contemporary relationship with the digital, one can better explore imaginaries and experiences of "boundedness" that living in a digital world brings. This point is most actively developed in the final case of the dissertation which explores how "love hotel aggregation platforms" use data gathering capabilities of digital systems to provide non-judgmental "safe" rooms for unmarried couples, craving a place to be intimate.

Intimacy X Enclosure

When first writing *how* I was bringing the concepts of enclosure and intimacy together in this project, I instinctively used the symbol "X" to capture the connection between the two terms. There are several common uses of the symbol. An "X" can be mathematical, erotic, and locative. In mathematics, X signifies an unknown value. It is a sign for multiplication. X suggests that something is sexually explicit, as in "X rated". It can also denote a kiss in text-speak (as in XOXO). The symbol is used designate a specific location (as in X marks the spot) as well as indicate a point of crossing. In this dissertation the "X" in *intimacy X enclosure* is used to indicate the multidimensional points of intersection between intimacy and enclosure that I discuss through the chapter. My instinct to use a symbol (as opposed to a word) might also be indicative of subtle ways in which I have changed during the course of research and been influenced by the frequent use of symbols (e.g. @, #, +) as shorthand in the tech industry spaces. A reason why I use "X" as opposed to another conjunction is because it suggests that the coming together of the two concepts results in more than a sum of its parts. I offer the coming together of intimacy X enclosure as a heuristic to approach the many ways in which issues

associated with the terms intersect with each other. I offer this framing not as a theoretical proposition, but as a way to playfully bring together the two themes that undergird this project.

Throughout the dissertation I approach the formation of digital enclosures around intimate possibility as a culturally contextualized process that gets made and unmade in unexpected ways, because of local circumstances (e.g. businesses norms, demographic trends, popular discourse, legal systems, colonial history). Attention to the *politics of placemaking* (both digital and physical) within the model of digital enclosure, helps ground studies of intimacy by emphasizing the material *consequences* of increased interlinkage between physical and virtual spaces. It reminds us that packaging of intimate possibility through "enclosures" (of audiences/users, apps, platform affordances, physical spaces) can quickly be a way for intimacy to be commoditized with greater ease. At the same time, to be intimate involves seeking out and yearning for enclosure (e.g. to be enclosed in the arms of a loved one, or as discussed in the third case study in this dissertation seeking out a private space to be intimate as an unmarried couple). Thus, focusing on ideas about intimacy can destabilize the idea that digital enclosures are necessarily carceral. The "closeness" implicit in intimacy, adds to the idea of enclosure by turning the spotlight on the affective comfort of being enclosed and being close

The three case studies in the dissertation examine the coming together of intimacy and enclosure at a different level of app production (broadly imagined). As the case studies progress my focus gradually shifts from the representation and management of bodies on dating apps to the politics of place involved in transitioning intimate encounters from online to offline. The first case looks at intimacy X enclosure at the level of marketing, branding, and advertising. The second examines it at the level of app building features and design decisions. The third approaches it at the level of creating physical spaces to be intimate. The consequence of the

enclosure of intimate possibilities in each chapter includes a reifying of gendered ways of desiring, a struggle to contain the fluidity of queerness within the app format, and a creation of new spaces for unmarried couples to be physically close to each other. Stretching across the dissertation I show that the dominant framing of the need for digital enclosures is to ensure 'safety', even as who gets to be kept safe, who one needs to be kept safe from, and how safety mechanisms work often remains rather blurry.

Discussing these registers of intimacy X enclosure I contribute to an established body of scholarship that analyzes media/tech industries to make important claims about the evolving nature of globalization, citizenship, modernity, and identity politics. These include, Sender's (2012) examination of the processes involved in identifying and selling a gay market in the US. Punathambekar's (2013) discussion of how the imaginary of 'Bollywood' is produced. Mazzarella's (2003) exploration of the use of eroticism to market 'difference' in India's globalizing advertising industry of the 1990s. Mohan & Punathambekar's (2019) writing on the localization of YouTube in India by content producers. And Amrute's (2016) research on the racialized and classed dynamics of 'cognitive labor' among Indian IT workers in Berlin. Drawing inspiration from these scholars' commitment to understanding the mundane practices through which media products are formed, I ask questions about how corporate systems institutionalize certain visions of intimacy at the expense of others and how people involved in dating/dating adjacent app production navigate the messiness and complexity of knowing users.

Grounding answers to these questions within empirical research regarding in the intricacies of regional histories allows me to make careful claims about digitality in the present. In this way, I hope this dissertation can speak to recent scholarship looking at platforms as not simply technical systems, but market and cultural systems rooted in regional contexts,

relationalities, and histories of India. Rather than thinking about accounts from the global south as 'additions' to a cannon of critical cultural approaches to digital media and technology industries, my approach aligns with the perspective that the purpose of contextualization is to ask what forms digital theory might take if it originated from experiences of people in non-western spaces. This perspective has been articulated by several postcolonial media studies scholars (Chun, 2011; Shome, 2016; Parameswaran, 2004; Kumar & Parameswaran, 2018; Willems, 2014).

Approaching Apps

Each case in the dissertation carefully considers the production processes surrounding a different kind of app within India's dating/intimate platform ecosystem. It contributes to the emerging field of "App Studies" that emerged as a discernable collective of work in Media and Communication studies around 2015[13]. All the digital platforms discussed in the dissertation are available as downloadable smartphone-based apps, though many are also accessible via web browsers. I often use the term app and digital platform interchangeably over the course of the dissertation, since the technological products studied often are both. At the same time, I recognize that studying production practices at the site of "the app" can be particularly fruitful, because of its unique position as an entry point connecting the individual to broader internet ecosystems[14]. For instance, (Hassan, 2018) notes that -

[13] See App Studies Initiative (2021) for a summary of publications.

[14] Users subvert apps intended purposes and apps change their products to incorporate these user patterns.

> The app itself is unremarkable as far as digital enabling goes. It is a work of relatively unsophisticated algorithmic coding. But the app, especially since 2010, has become a significant driver of the web ecology and a major point of entry into digital political practice (para 4).

Similarly, (Morris & Murray, 2018) observe that –

> Not only is the number of apps and the pace at which they have become a primary model for making, circulating, and using software remarkable, but also apps represent a moment of historical rupture in the selling of software. (p. 6)

Two studies on dating app production cultures that have significantly informed my research approach were Murray & Sapnar Ankerson (2016) work on the production of sociality through the design decisions of the founder of lesbian dating app Dattch and Wang (2019; 2020) exploration of labor practices involved in livestreams of Chinese gay men over dating app Blued.

Murray & Ankerson (2016) lay out how features of Dattch (later rebranded as HER) are identified and designed through an iterative process where designers are required to translate what "contact" and "connection" would look like over the platform interface in ways that fit the profit making imperatives of the app's funders. They note that underlying the process of app development were often conflicting temporal pressures - from the fast paced profit based result focused metrics of startup accelerators to the app's initial offering that attempted to reduce the sense of temporal urgency to "connect" based on likely proximity that gay male dating apps like Grindr had made dominant. Wang's (2019; 2020) research explores the relationship between financial flows and dating app infrastructures. Wang (2019; 2020) explores how Chinese dating app Blued monetizes the data traffic produced by its users and their live stream (e.g. virtual gifting, following, liking sharing etc.). She argues that the data produced by the labor of Blued

live streamers becomes a key corporate asset for the company, who present the sexual affect of online interactions to investors as measurable metrics of engagement. Wang's writing builds on an established swathe of scholarship on the recognition of LGBTQ individuals as consuming, economic subjects[15]. What is unique, she argues is that rather than the "consumption" of a good or a service, "expression" of one's queer desire that becomes what is valued as by the corporate dating app system.

Murray & Ankerson's (2016) emphasis on the temporalities of app production inspired me to segment field notes and interviews gathered in Delhi and Mumbai (app offices, speaker series, cultural events, product launches, coffee shops, meet-ups) in terms of both spatial location (where was the data gathered) to the kinds of temporal flows dominating the spaces where data was gathered (the nine-to-five culture of certain offices, the heightened sense of urgency in investor meetings, the more relaxed bounds on time in informal conversations over coffee etc.).

In addition, I pay attention to the longer temporal arc (technopanics surrounding mobile phones, arrest of queer activists) that affect current dynamics of dating app production. In this way, my research is deeply grounded in the cultural politics and temporal flows surrounding ideas about intimacy. Additionally, building on Wang's observation that "expression" of desire is what is commoditized in the set of Blued, I consider what kinds of "expressions" of desire and intimacy are celebrated by dating and dating adjacent apps. Unlike Blued, which was a well-established multinational corporation at the time of Wang's research, my work on Delta and StayUncle as they struggle through the initial phase of incubation and starting up provides a

[15] See also Chasin (2000); Campbell (2005); Sender (2012).

unique point in a journey to observe how desirability and connection are initially imagined by apps and morph as platforms evolve.

A note on methods

Between 2016 and 2019, I conducted eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in large technology hubs in India. I was primarily based between the cities of Delhi and Bangalore, with short (one to two weeks) stints in Mumbai and Pune. During these visits, I conducted interviews with founders, upper and mid-level executives in 12 dating app companies specifically targeting the Indian market *and* having an on-the-ground regional office (Aisle, Blued, Coastered, Cogxio, Betterhalf.ai, GoGaga, Delta, DateIITians, Floh, Twango, TrulyMadly, Tinder). I also spoke to contract workers providing translation and community outreach services for two dating app companies that did not have an office in India at the time (Grindr, OkCupid). In addition, I conducted in-depth interviews with the founders of three ancillary app industries - two were 'love hotel aggregation platforms' (LuvStay, StayUncle), and one was an online sex toy store (LuvTreats). Although I present a detailed discussion of only four platforms in the dissertation, my claims about dating app production cultures are rooted in this broader understanding of experiences of different players in the dating and dating adjacent app ecosystem.

Apart from people directly involved in making specific apps, I also talked to app users, freelance content writers, tech journalists, funders, startup advisors, sex activists, queer rights advocates, artists, and podcasters. This helped me get a sense of how the expected uses of dating apps are transformed by the many players involved in producing discourse surrounding dating and digital cultures in India. While this dissertation is not about user experiences, talking to avid Indian dating app users was a useful way to contextualize and explore how assumptions about

users by dating app companies were interpreted and negotiated by the users themselves. To this end, I carried out in-depth interviews (between one to two hours long) with (mostly female) users of dating apps. These users were in their early to mid-twenties, English speaking, and educated.

The first round of fieldwork took place during the summer of 2016 (June, July). The second was in the summer of 2017 (July). The third and longest stretch took place over five months in the winter/spring of 2018 and 2019 (November'18 to March'19). During the three field visits, I interacted with individuals working within the dating app ecosystem several times allowing relationships of trust to evolve over the course of multiple interactions. In my first field visit, I spent time as a 'scholar in residence' at Godrej Culture Labs in Mumbai. This lab is a cross disciplinary 'hub' that creates a range of programming surrounding the theme of modernity in India. Curating a panel discussion (on where 'technology meets the erotic') as part of my time at the lab became a way to build initial connections with industry actors and draw on the many personal contacts available through the lab's networks. Conducting fieldwork at different points throughout the course of three years allowed me to experience firsthand shifts taking place in a rapidly evolving industry. For instance, the changes in Tinder's approach to the India market between 2016 and 2018 form a key part of my analysis in the first case study of the dissertation.

Secondary material analyzed during this project consisted of public facing material produced by the digital platforms, such as social media posts (Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook posts), video and print advertisements (accessed through YouTube pages), websites, blog posts, podcasts, Google Play Store descriptions and all information available within the apps themselves. I looked at discursive trends about online intimacies and dating cultures in India by following media reports from sources like *YourStory, Wired, Scroll, Quartz, Buzzfeed, Business Insider.* In addition, I examined social media tags such as #100IndianTinderTales and

#DelhiPride2018 alongside financial information available on Crunchbase to get a sense of the evolving discursive and financial landscape surrounding the dating app ecosystem more broadly. Photos taken during fieldwork of the outside of buildings, signs, ads, brochures etc. were also included in the database of material analyzed for this project.

The main arguments in this dissertation are not some 'secret' insights into the inner workings of dating app algorithms or company secrets as that would be unfair, unethical, and illegal, but rather claims triangulated from personal interviews, observations at industry events and material put out by companies themselves[16]. Individuals directly referenced by name are all public facing figures (e.g. heads of companies, CEOs, upper management). Interviews with these upper-level executives were recorded with their permission. On several occasions notes were taken during informal interview sessions. People who occupied more precarious positions within the app industry (e.g. entry level developers or content freelancers, and all users) are referred to only by pseudonym as they have been anonymized.

My approach to gathering and analyzing material was drawn from Caldwell's (2008) conceptualization of industry sources (from office architecture to interviews with executives to publicity reports to news stories) as equally productive sites of analysis when critically assessed in relation to their degree of 'embeddedness' within the industrial process. This allowed me to examine paratextual material produced by journalists on the peripheries of the corporate technological process alongside interviews with funders at the center of the space and on-contract designers that might no longer be officially part of 'dating apps' but were at one-point

[16] Research conducting during field visits was exempt by the IRB as I was either dealing with public facing individuals or anonymized interviewees.

integral to the development of their app features. Looking at how actors within the dating app industry interpreted trade material, financial reports, advertisements etc. and talked about themselves more generally helped build a more complete picture of dating app related corporate arrangements.[17]

Structure of remaining chapters

This dissertation consists of three case studies that explore the pressures, conflicts, and anxieties of facing people operating within the dating app ecosystem in India. Following a media industry case study approach (Havens et al., 2009), each chapter situates digitally mediated intimate possibilities in India within a different frame of reference, starting with cultural politics of gender, moving on to imaginaries of queerness, and finally ending with an exploration of the politics of space in urbanizing India.

In the first case study, I use advertisement analysis, corporate ethnographic fieldwork, and formal interviews with the heads of two popular dating apps in India (TrulyMadly and Tinder) to show how the boundaries of intimate possibilities on these apps are refracted and reimagined through market evaluations of gendered self-expression. More specifically, I explore the ways in which ideals of femininity and masculinity are strategically negotiated by dating app companies explicitly targeting the Indian market. Looking at how both Tinder and TrulyMadly approach "desire" and “desirability" as gendered attributes reveals how the terms of entry into a dating platform are shaped by local histories of moral panics surrounding telecommunication

[17] Similar approaches have been used in research on dating apps. See Murray & Sapnar Ankerson (2016); Albury et al. (2017); Wilken et al. (2019); Wang (2020).

technologies and women. I explore intimacy X enclosure at the level of marketing, branding and public outreach. Like Chun (2011), I observe that while dating apps try to present themselves as neutral spaces, their production processes (e.g. advertising) are often premised on neoliberal aspirations and reify agency of those users whose identities fit into these molds most neatly.

Mapping how Tinder and TrulyMadly's initial approach towards the Indian market shifted between 2016 and 2019, I show how social narratives of appropriate forms are gendered and bound by discourses of safety and protection (e.g. women need to be protected from lower class men). I note that despite having quite different corporate structures and scales of operations, both Tinder and TrulyMadly evaluate performances of masculinity and femininity in similar ways. I chart how Tinder succeeds in knowing its Indian users, after an initial failure in the region, by cloaking its 'on-label' use (Duguay, 2020) through language of the zeitgeist (memes, youth culture), yet not changing its sanitized vision of dating. The broader argument here is that enclosures bounding who the app is for are opened through advertising and repositioned in ways that seemingly address user demands for more sexual agency.

In the second case study, I analyze how Delta (an Indian dating app for the queer community) envisions and designs its platform. Through interviews and informal meetings with the founder of the company and professionals working within the organization, alongside participant observation at events organized by Delta, I examine how the malleable, transient, fluid qualities of queerness intersect with the pressures of funding, norms of digital design regional histories surrounding the criminalization of homosexuality. Set against the backdrop of the repeal of the Section 377 of the Indian penal code - I observe the ways in which the legacy of this colonial law and queer rights movements emerging in the late 1980s and early 1990s continues to influence the decisions made by companies within the dating app ecosystem.

I argue that at Delta, “queerness” is imagined as an important feature of the app (the platform aims to provide a space for everyone to express their unique sexual desires). However the ways in which freedom of expression is mobilized becomes limited by categorization required to make matching algorithms work, meet metrics of investment success, and adhere to the norms of clean UX design. I examine intimacy X enclosure at the register of decisions production decisions surrounding app affordances and functionalities. The argument here is that the idea of queerness as an open, fluid expansive mode of imagining intimate possibilities is resistant to the mode of self-disclosure demanded by apps and that the reasons underlying this resistance are rooted in postcolonial histories of queer marginalization.

In the third case study, I center questions of space and place briefly highlighted in previous chapters through a close examination of online ‘love hotel’ aggregation app Stay Uncle. I take seriously the push that "To consider the logic of intimacy is not solely to study domesticity, romantic and/or sexual relations, but to question the places and the supposed non-places of intimacy" (Antwi et al., 2013, p. 1). Understanding the processes involved in coordinating the transition from communication online to embodied intimate experiences offline is key to understanding the dynamics of intimacy X enclosure at the level of built infrastructures and physical place. I observe that in urban India the norm of living with one's family until marriage, stigma associated with public displays of affection (between men and women) and the risk of being a victim of moral policing often makes it difficult for people meeting over a dating app to then access a safe private space. This difficulty is only heightened in smaller cities/towns and among groups who lack socio-cultural and economic capital. A handful of online hotel aggregation apps (apps that work with hotels to provide users of the app a list of a range of

vetted ‘safe’ rooms) have met with unexpected financial success, filling the need of physical safe spaces for people to be intimate.

Taking an in-depth look at the production practices of StayUncle, one of the first platforms to begin operating in this space, I argue that the possibilities intimacy dating apps promise are dependent on the existence of ancillary app infrastructures, like love hotel aggregators. Here, I ask how private spaces for intimate contact are curated and made visible to the public through digital platforms. The argument here is that intimate spaces are not just places that protect from the dangers of ‘publicness’ (e.g. policing and public scrutiny), they are places defined by the assurance that one's relationship will be recognized and accepted.

In the conclusion of the dissertation, I reflect on the origins of the project, early fieldwork, and developments post-fieldwork (particularly the Covid-19 pandemic) to summarize key insights, including the power of national narratives of gender and sexuality to enclose everyday imaginations of intimacy and the uncertain promises of the app economy. As several academic and popular commentators have noted, human interactions through apps are becoming an increasing part of everyday life. The dissertation weaves together imaginations and mobilizations of notions of desire across players in India’s dating app ecosystem, in an acknowledgement of the way that intimacy and digitality are becoming increasingly conjoined.

Chapter 2
(Re)Positioning Desire and Desirability on Tinder and TrulyMadly

One of my favorite locations to conduct interviews was a French patisserie on the outer lanes of the posh GK I market in Delhi[18]. The cafe, located on a side street, was small, quiet, and nearly always empty. Late on a Wednesday evening in November 2018 I was there interviewing Akanksha, a friend of a friend who was an avid dating app user. Akanksha[19] was in her final year of law school in Delhi and had been using dating apps ever since a bad breakup about two and a half years ago. Over a pot of French press coffee and mushroom-on-toast Akanksha described how she had at one point or another been on Bumble, OkCupid, Delta, CoffeeMeetsBagel, TrulyMadly and Tinder. On these platforms, she had looked for one-night stands, found an escape from the monotony of college classes, and explored her bisexuality by flirting with (though never meeting) women. At the end of our interview, Akanksha asked me - "So you tell me now, what do *they* think? What are *they* trying to do with us?". The *they* she was referring to were the dating app companies themselves. Akanksha's question highlights how dating app users are often curious and critical about the production practices surrounding the apps they use. Her question captures a mixture of anxiety and acceptance that users associate with the how information about them is collected and managed by dating platforms.

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[18] GK 1 market or Greater Kailash 1 market is a large shopping area in south Delhi that has small boutiques and established international brand clothing stores, as well as coffee shops, bars, and restaurants.

[19] This is a pseudonym.

For Akanksha, the question was not about *whether* dating apps companies were trying to exploit her, but *what* forms their influence might take. After my sheepish response of - "Well, I don't know really. I guess they are just trying to get more people to download the app", we continued to chat, and it became clear that Akanksha was aware that dating app companies were gathering and selling data of women like her (i.e. educated, upwardly mobile, urban, English speaking, upper middle-class). Akanksha had a frank curiosity about the workings of dating app companies that came from an acceptance that digital corporations would "use her". She was interested in learning more about how she might be better able to circumvent the boundaries on her ability to make 'independent' choices by learning more about how producers understood people like her.

This dissertation is not about users' beliefs, and Akanksha is not representative of all users, however my conversation with her felt significant and stuck with me in the months after I returned back to Michigan. It emphasized the fact that just as app producers try to "know" the people who use their platforms, app users can also be keen to acquire intimate knowledge of how platforms work.

Looking at how dating app companies work to understand and market themselves; this chapter explores how Tinder and TrulyMadly advertised 'dating' as they tried to stake their claim in India between 2016 and 2019. It is not a comprehensive overview of the many changes that took place within both companies during these years, but rather an in-depth account of initial approaches to 'knowing an audience'. Therefore, through a combination of visual analysis of advertising campaigns, participant observation at events and interviews with upper-level management, I compare the marketing approaches of Tinder (an international market leader

within the dating app industry) and TrulyMadly (one of the key players in the local Indian dating market).

The video advertisements discussed in this chapter (*Creep Qawwali, Watchboyz, Sanskari*, and *Adulting Can Wait*) were downloaded from the official YouTube accounts of Tinder India and TrulyMadly and were analyzed for significant tropes and themes. Additionally, public facing material produced by app companies (e.g. Facebook posts, Website, App descriptions, Instagram posts, interviews with journalists) were analyzed in conjunction with user and popular media discourse surrounding the platforms (e.g. user tweets in response to ad campaigns, interviews with journalists and artists, tech magazine reports).

Through a mixture of interviews and participant observation at industry events I was able to get firsthand insight into how executives at Tinder and TrulyMadly made sense of their advertising efforts and negotiated shifts in strategy. I conducted in-depth interviews with the two upper-level executives at Tinder's India office in 2016 and then again in 2018, an in-depth interview with the co-founder and CEO of TrulyMadly in 2016, and an informal conversation with TrulyMadly's CEO again in 2018. I also observed industry players at two key events. The first was panel discussion open to the public on 'Love, Sex, Desire' in Mumbai in which both Sachin Bhatia (co-founder of TrulyMadly) and Taru Kapoor (Head of Tinder India) participated. The second was a keynote lecture by the then CEO of Tinder global (Elie Seidman) at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT)-Delhi during his world tour of Tinder's Asian markets in 2018.

The question guiding this chapter is about how dating apps get to know and communicate with a new audience (or userbase). The journey of getting to know their user base involves both Tinder and TrulyMadly having to grapple with the messiness of gender ideals, given the long history of national discourse tying modernity to particular visions of masculinity and femininity.

In the process, I examine how the boundaries of acceptable desire and desirability are defined by app companies and how these definitions are deeply gendered. In addition to approaching intimacy at the interpersonal level, by considering intimacy as a broader sense of familiarity (between producers, digital products, and users), I argue that the enclosures directing users to who dating apps are for, get strategically repositioned by companies in ways that are seemingly more agential.

More specifically, I trace how Tinder (a platform with global reach) and TrulyMadly (a region-specific platform) work to appeal to Indian users and in doing so emphasize a highly sanitized vision of dating that celebrates cosmopolitanism. Identifying who the app is for is a *dynamic* process undertaken by corporate actors, and one that is informed by region specific gender ideals, user reactions, and industry assumptions.

In this chapter I build on existing writing about the role of media industries in moderating imaginaries and ideals of Indian masculinity and femininity. I begin by examining critical cultural media studies and anthropological scholarship about the figure of the *new Indian man* and *new Indian woman* in Digital India. Examining this literature I highlight how these figures have discursively constructed dominant ideas about Indian masculinities and femininities. I then examine how desire and desirability is contained by TrulyMadly through concerns about safety represented by the figure of the creep. Following this, I look at Tinder's early branding failures in India, focusing on how public understanding of Tinder as a hook-up app complicated the platforms initial advertising approach. Finally. I explore how Tinder re-positioned itself by pushing the narrative that - to be young and Indian was to be on Tinder.

Representations of Masculinity and Femininity in Digital India

Media studies scholars in India have written extensively about the strength of the relationship between gender ideals and imaginaries of nationhood. Nearly thirty years before dating apps like Tinder and TrulyMadly struggled with how to appeal to Indian users, Munshi (1998) traced how burgeoning Indian make-up and fitness industries went through a similar struggle and used the figure of 'the new Indian woman' to represent to the public who their ideal users were. The new Indian woman was a woman who embodies a global lifestyle but sticks to Indian values. Tracing the use of the 'new Indian woman' by the Indian television industry of the 1990s, Mankekar (2000) argued that popular television melodramas such as Udaan and Rajani sustained the imaginary of this suitably modern female figure by featuring secular, modern middle-class consumers who embodied these values. Similarly, observing the first time that the Miss World pageant was held in India in 1996, Parameswaran (2004) wrote about how perceptions regarding the benefits of being associated with the event were tied to categories of gender and nation. Daya (2009) highlighted that the enduring legacy of the vision of the 'new Indian woman' was emblematic of modern Indian femininity, arguing that the consequences of this imaginary can be severely detrimental to women whose bodies do not fit into the norms of this figure, such as women who have been violated through sexual assault.

Underlying all these narratives as Weinbaum et al. (2008) note, is the issue of how female bodies and behaviors become representative of the nation state's relationship with modernity. As a result, the use of mobile phone technologies by women has repeatedly been the object of public scrutiny and moral panic. Accompanying the proliferation of cellphones in the early 2000s were a series of moral panics centered on the disintegration of Indian cultural values as a result of women using cellphones. In 2004, a clip of two students engaging in sexual activity

was taken by cellphone. It passed as an MMS (Multimedia Messaging Service) clip from one mobile phone user to another. News of the spread of the clip was publicized by the media and led to a nationwide scandal regarding cell phone "misuse" (Venugopal, 2004). In the aftermath of this scandal, several educational institutions banned mobile phones within the premises of their buildings (Padte, 2018). The moral argument underlying these bans was that the devices were encouraging indecency and creating risk for female students specifically.

The argument for the need to protect "women's bodies" to preserve ideals of the nation state continue into the present, with TikTok being one of the most recent media/tech objects under scrutiny. Like the calls to ban mobile phones in the early 2000s, recent calls to ban TikTok appear to be in a large part motivated by protectionism rooted in a need to control expression of female sexuality, particularly those of young women[20](Bhandari & Kovacs, 2021). For instance, in April 2019, after several local politicians called for a ban of TikTok, the Madras HC (High Court) received a petition advocating for a ban of the app. The petition argued that the app was degrading Indian culture and was responsible for social issues like pornography, and pedophilia. The writ petition submitted to the Madurai Bench in the Madras HC lays out the need for such a ban in the following language[21] -

> I humbly submit that youngsters and children's are using Tik Tok App they are usually much faster than adults. It is this quick rate of adaption that also makes then susceptible to danger. *Young girl's steps in front towards the camera taking attention away. Some of the people get the distinct impression* [emphasis added]. Majority of the teens are playing

[20] It is worth noting that these panics are part of a longer historical pattern, where new communication technologies from the telegraph to the landline have been met with widespread social anxiety.

[21] Grammatical errors and partial sentences have been included as found in the writ petition.

> pranks, gaffing around with duet videos sharing split screen to the strangers. It is leading to controversial and social stigma. (Muthukumar VS The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, 2019)

Evidence of the risk of controversy and stigma posed by Tik Tok, in the petition included – an auto driver being arrested for posting a video that "included a women from Chennai on TikTok" and a fifteen year old girl in Mumbai committing suicide because her grandmother scolded her for using the app (Muthukumar VS The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, 2019). The attempted petition was only partially successful, in that it was passed, but then repealed. However the call for a ban in the first place is symbolic of continued scrutiny of technology use by women.

Bans of cellphones and the apps they hold most significantly affect women who come from less affluent backgrounds. Between 2012 and 2017 it was in impoverished parts of rural Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Gujrat that village councils introduced significant fines against women who were found to be using mobile phones (Reuters, 2012; Kayleigh, 2016). Activists in Sundebari distinct in Bihar activists pointed to extramarital affairs and elopements within their community to explain why imposing fines on women found to be using mobile phones in public spaces was necessary (Reuters, 2012). Four years later when a village council in Mehsana district in Gujrat decided to impose a mobile phone ban against women a member from the district council explained their reasoning to a reporter saying - "The girls don't study properly if they have mobile phones, and they can get into all sorts of bad situations" (Chandran, 2016)

In June 2020, (in a development unrelated to the Madras HC ban attempt) when TikTok became one of the many 'Chinese apps'[22] banned in the country for being "prejudicial to sovereignty and integrity of India" and for "defense, security of state and public order" (Bhandari & Kovacs, 2021, p. 50) it was women from small towns and villages who were bound to the home whose avenues of expression and exploration were most affected. Bhandari & Kovacs (2021) summarize this situation saying -

> Unlike Facebook and Instagram that mostly catered to elite, urban and middle class India, apps like TikTok were hugely popular among a different, less affluent class of people, including women, living in small towns and rural areas, who may not be highly literate or comfortable with English. These women, whose primary identity has been expected to be tied to their home (whether as a mother or a wife), defied societal expectations in their embrace of apps such as TikTok and the online fun, fame, and fortune that accompanied their use. (pp. 48-51)

In this way, on one hand digital communication technologies (both mobile phones and the apps they hold) have been a source of moral panics. On the other, 'digitality' has been branded by the state as a vital vehicle for social progress. The Digital India campaign's website describes itself as a "flagship program of the Government of India with a vision to transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy" (Digital India, 2020). The campaign is rooted in a techno-determinist approach to development that presents increasing access and availability of online infrastructures and internet connectivity as key to progress of India (and Indians). As part of the government's 2015 Digital India campaign, the Indian state has pushed

[22] Other banned apps include WeChat and PUBG.

the idea of the “entrepreneurial Indian woman” as the pinnacle of the potential of digital technology to empower those who are otherwise marginalized.

Gurumurthy et al. (2016, p. 390) observe how the figure of “the digitally enskilled woman entrepreneur and volunteer of humble origins" becomes a rallying cry for more digital inclusion and evidence of India’s “progress” through digital technologies. Thus, there is an underlying tension within the Indian states’ relationship with digital technology. At a sociocultural level, this tension gets worked through in public discourse about women’s relationship with digital technologies. The Indian nation state continually negotiates between the need to preserve hegemonic cultural structures (that are at the root of technopanics) and their vested interests in global technocapitalist systems that are at the heart of India’s IT economy (Rao & Lingam, 2020, p. 15).

There are a growing number of dating apps in India with physical offices in the country. These offices tend to be clustered around large IT hubs (such as Gurgaon, Noida, Whitefield, Koramangala[23]) and are direct beneficiaries of a nationwide push to encourage and celebrate an IT) centric national economy. At the same time, new rules about digital security and morality such as the bans on cellphone use, and specific apps like TikTok, illustrate the ways in which access to technologies can be leveraged as forms of social control.

Like the figure of the ‘new Indian woman’ the idealized vision of contemporary Indian masculinity symbolized by the new Indian man, emphasizes cosmopolitanism, upward mobility, and ambition (Cayla, 2008). Overall, Garlick (2017) observes that hegemonic colonial narratives framed Indian masculinity as simultaneously effeminate and hyper-masculine. In addition, he

[23] I visited offices in all of these hubs during the course of fieldwork.

writes that during the first half of the 20th century Gandhian ideals of Indian masculinity that were based on the belief that Indians had certain virtues of sexual self-control that westerners lacked became widespread. In the contemporary context, Philip (2018) in his research on young Delhi ride share drivers, observes that "ideas of leisure and pleasure now form part of the dominant narrative of a socially celebrated commodified masculinity for young men" (p. 83).

Ethnographers studying contemporary Indian masculinities have mapped the making and unmaking of the 'new Indian man' within a range of sites in which ideas about manhood are learnt and practiced in India. Select examples of these sites include the workplace (Jeffrey, 2010; Ramaswami, 2006), local politics (Lukose, 2009), sports like wrestling (Alter, 1992, 2004; Peabody, 2009) and migration (McDuie-Ra, 2013). A theme shared across all these examples on the construction of Indian masculinities is that heteronormativity, patriarchy, and allegiance to the nation that gets wrapped up in dominant ideals surrounding masculinity, and this then becomes embedded in constellations of religion, class, caste, and language.

Writing about new Indian masculinities varies from the literature regarding modernity and the Indian female figure in a couple of important ways. First, unlike the figure of the 'new Indian woman' the idea of the 'new Indian man' remains less established particularly in the context of new media environments (Phillips, 2018). A second difference between writing about new Indian masculinities and femininities is that writing about the sexualization of male bodies in the circulation of such media tends to take secondary status to its association with religion and caste systems (See Srivastava, 2000; Osella & Osella, 2006; Ikeya, 2014). Finally, as with many of the consumerist activities surrounding the lifestyle of India's new middle class, socially approved behaviors for women tend to become looped into broader political and cultural debates regarding acceptable versions of modernity to a greater extent than that of men's behaviors.

The various attempts at negotiating representations of Indian masculinity and femininity by Tinder and TrulyMadly that will be discussed in this chapter show how ideas of the 'new Indian woman' and 'new Indian man' continue to be strategically deployed by industry actors in their efforts to define what "Indian dating" should look like. Dating apps like Tinder and TrulyMadly are vulnerable to the anxieties surrounding the effect of technology on idealized visions of gendered morality, while benefiting from positive rhetoric about "digitality" as the future of India. I explore specifically how these anxieties might play into dating apps approaches to framing their product as they enter the Indian market. I note that while both apps try to present their platforms as neutral spaces, their advertising strategies are often premised on neoliberal aspirations that reify the agency of only those users whose identities fit into these molds. Looking at how Tinder and TrulyMadly approach" desire" and "desirability" reveals how terms of entry into an app are shaped by regional histories of gendered anxieties surrounding technology use.

Containing desire through discourses of safety

On a hot June afternoon in 2016, I made my way to TrulyMadly's corporate headquarters in south Delhi. This was my first ever meeting with a head of a large Indian dating company. Walking into TrulyMadly's ground floor foyer from a dusty street in an up-and-coming neighborhood, filled with small independent art galleries, I was greeted by an office space that had an all-white décor and an open floor plan. Shuffling my feet into what appeared to be a waiting area, I perched myself on the edge of an ottoman underneath a neon sign made up entirely of lightbulbs spelling the word "chai" in capital letters. Overall, the layout of TrulyMadly's south Delhi office exuded a modern minimalist aesthetic. Its design features

looked like it would fit into an office space in any cosmopolitan capital around the world. The "youthfulness" of the space - from the copious amount of hashtag inspired art on the walls (e.g. #letsfindlove) and neon accents (in cushions and coasters), were an interesting contrast to the rather traditional backgrounds of the app's founders, all of whom were in their late thirties and had previously worked in finance, banking, and travel.

I was there to speak to one of the app's founders, Sachin Bhatia, about what he believed users desired or wanted from a dating app like TrulyMadly. Sachin's response to my questions about this were clear and consistent, always a variation of the statement "the app is meant to allow people to *safely explore* their sexual desires". His responses suggested that for TrulyMadly as a dating app, ideas about desire were bound by a dual emphasis on safety and sexuality. The importance of safety was built into the app from its very inception, arising from the founders and their VC (Venture Capital) backers' belief that addressing this concern was fundamental to the Indian context and was what made dating in India a unique challenge. On the other hand, TrulyMadly's emphasis on its platform being a place for sexual interaction and expression was a product of their journey getting to know their user base. As my conversation with Sachin Bhatia went on, Bhatia described how he was surprised by the responses to early surveys conducted by the TrulyMadly team. In these surveys, users repeatedly indicated that one of their favorite parts of using the app was "dirty talking" with people they had never met. Asking him why he had found this behavior surprising, I was told "Well you don't expect this from Indian girls, do you".

Bhatia's response here captures the essence of broad public and media discourse regarding behavioral norms for women in India – namely the idealization of "good" women as innately passive in sexual scenarios. For example, scholars have noted media representation of female sexuality in Bollywood tends to characterize female leads as stoic bearers of the amorous

desires of male heroes, the women rarely, if ever, being driven by any sexual desire themselves (Nijhawan, 2009; Moorti, 2012). Instead, the burden of erotic need is borne by the figure of the vamp who makes a temporary appearance often through a song or dance routine (colloquially known as an item number) and then disappears back into the periphery of the media text's storyline. Thus, the kind of intimate desire expected from women, or at least from those portrayed as "good" in popular Indian media, is romantic desire devoid of sexual drive. Sachin Bhatia's surprise at the overt sexual expressiveness of women on the platform (by "dirty talking") illustrates how expectations regarding the boundaries of female desire seep into basic assumptions dating app producers have regarding the functions their technologies could and should serve.

What is particularly valuable to note in the case of TrulyMadly is not so much their apparent surprise at sexual activity initiated by females over their platform or attempts to capitalize on it, but rather their efforts to bind possibilities of this erotic desire through discourses of safety (both in digital and physical domains). The terms of entry onto TrulyMadly in 2016 were advertised on the app's Google Play Store description through the analogy of friends setting up other friends on a date -

> Safe and Discreet - They're like those friends who know how to keep all information you share private. Your profile can only be viewed by the ones they sort out for you. And you can only be messaged by those you have liked. *No casual surfing, no spamming, no peeping tom business* [emphasis added] (Google Play Store, 2016)

The term "They" in the excerpt above refers to the app itself (TrulyMadly). A key concern for the app is keeping romantic and intimate connections over TrulyMadly both "safe and discreet". What is not permitted in this vision of appropriate intimacy over the platform is "casual surfing",

"spamming" and "peeping tom business". The use of the phrases "peeping tom" and "creep" are particularly interesting both because of its colloquial, informal tone but also because it brings in dynamics of who should or should not be looking at the women on the app.

Beware the creep

TrulyMadly's first viral advertisement (*Creep Qawwali)* encapsulates Bhatia's vision of the kind of "protective" enclosure his platform can create for Indian women and highlighted in TrulyMadly's Google Play store description. Released on October 8th, 2015, Creep Qawwali cemented TrulyMadly's presence as a key player in India's mobile phone based dating app ecosystem. While this was not TrulyMadly's first video advertisement, it was the first one to gain significant online traction. The Creep Qawwali video amassed over 1.5 million views on TrulyMadly's YouTube channel by April 2016, just six months after it was first released. In the advertisement, potential female users are offered protection from the unpleasant and dangerous figure of the 'male creep' (TrulyMadly, 2015).

Figure 4 - Opening shot and title of Creep Qawwali at 0.05 seconds into the video (TrulyMadly, 2015)

The video opened with two troupes of female qawwali[24] singers sitting on the floor facing each other in an ornate room replete with chandeliers, candelabras, fairy lights and flower arrangements. The title Creep Qawwali is briefly superimposed on this scene along with cartoon hearts, a 'tabla' (South Asian drum like instrument) and a caricature of a man with wide leering eyes and a curled beard that Sachin Bhatia described in an interview with me as "stereotypically creepy".

Figure - 5 Screenshot from Creep Qawwali with a close up of the lead singers. Translation: There is no creep, creepier than my creep (TrulyMadly, 2015)

During the video, the lead singers of the two qawwali troupes are locked in a tongue-in-cheek lyrical battle about which one of them has suffered the biggest male "creep" hitting on them. The figure of the "creep" described by the women embodies all the behaviors of "casual surfing", "spamming" and "peeping tom business" that the app presented itself as wanting to protect female users from in its app store desciptions. Using a combination of Hindi and English words the female singers recollect everyday instances of male harassment they have been subjected to. The stories they recount include encounters they have faced from "creepy" men in

[24] A style of Sufi devotional music.

both digital and physical spaces. For example, a verse towards the middle of the song has the following back-and-forth[25] -

Woman 1: My creep has sent me his picture via *WhatsApp*.

Woman 2: My creep has sent me his *dick pic* via *WhatsApp*.

Woman 1: He has already distributed our wedding cards.

Woman 2: He has already named my baby

Four and a half minutes after this exchange, the video ends when the two women realize that all this while the *same* 'creepy' man was harassing them. Their surprise at their realization is marked by laughter, an onscreen embrace and the then tagline of the app "Don't let boy browsing turn into creep browsing. Date wisely. Verified profiles only on TrulyMadly".

Considering this video in conjunction with the app's description on Googles Play store and its founder's articulation of the platforms vision, it appears as though TrulyMadly's early successes in appealing to the Indian userbase was premised on promoting female sexual agency while at the same time emphasizing that only they could successfully protect women from all the risks embracing that sexual agency might bring. Thus, even as TrulyMadly advertises itself as tool that opens up the kind of sexual possibilities women can access (e.g. "boy browsing"), it simultaneously reifies the boundaries of who one should not date (i.e. "the creep"). In doing so, TrulyMadly takes control of identifying the "creeps" from the "boys" by saying that it is the process of verification that they can provide that will weed one from the other on the platform. In other words, TrulyMadly framed themselves as the primary arbitrator of who was considered

[25] The snippet from the song has been translated from Hindi. The words that are italicized are words that were sung in English in the original version of the song.

safe, and that by taking on the responsibility emphasized to their imagined female user base that they would no longer have to worry about encountering 'undesirable' men.

Who am I to judge?

The risks unverified men might pose is fleshed out in another popular digital advertisement by TrulyMadly– *Watchboyz*. This video, released a couple of months after Creep Qawwali, shows four watchmen (or security guards) dressed in their khaki and blue uniforms sing a song apologizing to all the women they have worked for that they have "judged" in the past (TrulyMadly, 2016). Things the watchmen have judged women for while at their job include how late women come home, who they leave with and how short their skirt it. For instance, towards the middle of the video they sing[26] -

If you want to, then go to any boy's house

If you want to, then sit on a windowsill and smoke a *doobie*

If you want to, then swear in Hindi

Who am I to *judge*? Who am I to *judge*?

Like Creep Qawwali, Watchboyz has a snappy, upbeat melody and uses tongue and cheek humor to provide social commentary about Indian women's experiences that TrulyMadly believes will appeal to their imagined user base. The use of animated graphics in scenes in the Watchboyz video adds a sense of dynamism and lightness to the overall tone of the video despite covering the objectively serious issue of female harassment. Some of the visual and tonal similarities between the two ads can be explained by the fact that they were both directed and produced by

[26] Translations from Hindi to English. The words italicized are the words sung in English in the original song.

the online content ad wing of All India Bakchod (AIB), a comedy collective known for creating content primarily targeting young, urban, upwardly mobile Indians. While planning the Watchboyz video, all Sachin Bhatia said to AIB was that TrulyMadly wanted to emphasize the perspective of Indian women. He then left it up to AIB, an all-male group, that had already delivered the successful Creep Qawwali video to pitch ideas, saying in an interview with a magazine that he was "happy to follow their instincts" (Bhatt, 2016).

Figure 6 - YouTube Thumbnail of Watchboyz with a close up of one of the security guards or watchmen plays a lead role in the video (TrulyMadly, 2016)

Watchboyz repeatedly reminds the viewer that the watchmen and the women they are apologizing to, come from vastly different class positions. The watchmen only refer to the young women they are apologizing to as "madam" and the refrain of the song "kaun hoon mein judge karne wala" or "who am I to judge?" further emphasizes the point that men from a lower socioeconomic background, like the watchmen, are in no position to judge specifically the

sexually open, upper middle-class women in the video[27]. It is these women that TrulyMadly has identified as its ideal imagined userbase.

When developing the initial version of the application in 2013, TrulyMadly hired a UX design firm to conduct a workshop with key stakeholders to help TrulyMadly understand the key characteristics they hoped their platform would have. Keywords for the desired look/feel/structure of the platform by TrulyMadly executives were "Cool, Edgy, New Age, Clean, Visual, Intuitive, Engaging, Directional" and the characteristics of users according to other corporate stakeholders were "independent, evolved, outgoing, liberal, urban, semi-urban, progressive, anxious, aspirational, opinionated, influenced".

Coming back to the video, although Watchboyz frames "dating" as an act that is emblematic of women discovering and embracing their personal and sexual freedom, it is the male watchmen throughout who are primarily responsible for making the women's sexual freedom acceptable, by repeatedly vocalizing their newfound permissiveness. At the same time, overall, the humor in the video relies on parodying men occupying low socioeconomic positions by having them explicitly apologize for their "narrow-minded views." Much like the figure of the "creep", the watchmen in the video are marked by their *lack* of cosmopolitanism and upward mobility and represent an antithesis to the figure of the 'new Indian man'. In this way, Watchboyz continues a narrative of lower-class Indian men specifically, as a group in need of reformation. It is these "watchboyz" that need to be taught how to respect women, not the young men that the upper-class women in the video go on dates with.

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[27] It is worth noting here that towards the middle of the video 'Kamla Bai' a cleaning lady is featured. Kamla Bai, raps about similar experiences of facing judgement as the upper-class women in the video. But notably, her romantic interest is in the 'watchmen' not the upper class male figures shown in the video.

Figure 7 - Screenshot from Watchboyz at 2min 16 seconds with a close up of one of the security guards or watchmen allowing a woman to leave the gated premises with a young man who is presumably her romantic interest (TrulyMadly, 2016).

In a continuation of discourse that has circulated in Indian popular culture since the 1970s[28], throughout the video, the archaic, lower class, lower caste man depicted by the watchmen (who have finally recognized the error in their ways) represent a continual (yet ineffectual) threat to the upper class, cosmopolitan women in the video. By presenting lower class men as a group that are judgmental about women at their best, and dangerous towards them at their worst, the real violence that takes place against women in India gets framed as a singular problem of lower-class masculine cultures that need to either be reformed (like the watchmen) or eliminated (like the creep).

Reforming the 'creep'

[28] See Phadke et al., (2011) and Phadke (2020).

One of the ways in which TrulyMadly wanted to approach "reforming the creep" was by commoditizing the process through a premium service where a female staff member would chat in real time with male users and give them tips on how to become more successful in their digital interactions with women. Describing his view on the need for such a service Sachin Bhatia commented –

> We [men] don't grow up with skills like to talk. Our purpose now is to teach them how to chat…so now two weeks back we got this psychology major. She is just sitting and chatting with guys, telling them how to chat up, just chatting with guys telling them how to make a conversation. So if it is useful today, then, we can scale it up tomorrow and maybe even charge for it [as a premium service] the day after.

Thus, in the case of TrulyMadly, we see a twist on the tradition of scrutiny of female behavior over digital technologies (particularly mobile phones) and mainstream media (like Bollywood), in favor of a more explicit mandate to moderate performances of masculinity on the app. While there are certainly underlying expectations about how women should appropriately behave, as Sachin Bhatia's surprise at women "dirty talking" shows, expectations of "good" female behavior run deep but are subsumed by a preoccupation with guaranteeing "safety" by moderating male behavior.

In summary, it is a person's (particularly male persons) inability to engage within the visual, behavioral, and descriptive norms of desirability that places them at risk of being considered by the app as someone who is unsafe. In the process, the idea of dating on the platform gets discursively enclosed in a way that leaves out bodies that don't fit into the visions of sanitized cosmopolitan desires expected by the app. TrulyMadly emphasizes its ability to act as a protective digital enclosure to keep out or reform men like the 'watchman' and 'creep'

through processes like identity verification on the app. In Creep Qawwali the app assures its protection from figures like the creep, in Watchboyz the leery but apologetic watchmen are not even considered as a potential romantic interest for the women. Implied in the protection advertised in these videos, particularly in the Watchboyz video and more subtly in Creep Qawwali, is that women's sexual desires can and should be contained within their class brackets.

Here, I want to highlight two things - First is that TrulyMadly has a dynamic and adaptive approach to learning about their userbase. For instance, the app pivoted away from its origins as a platform aimed at getting people into serious relationships that would end in marriage (a vestige of which could still be seen in 2017 in its official registration as TrulyMadly Matchmakers Private Ltd) to embrace a more sexually forward self-presentation, as they realized that those were the types of interactions that were desired by users. Second, is that given the gender, class, and caste ideals of the region the consequences of the digital enclosures created by TrulyMadly's push to protect women's safety while giving them freedom means that it relies on pinning the many real risks of women to the chimera of the creep. Thus even as the app recognizes the sexual agency of users, particularly women, TrulyMadly's presentation of the purposes of their platform works to limit the reach of sexual exploration through the specter of potential threat.

"Just say it, you are a hook-up app!" Tinder's Growing pains of knowing users

The winter after TrulyMadly released Creep Qawwali on their YouTube channel in 2015, Tinder launched their first office ever outside the United States, in India. Headquartered in a small coworking space in the sprawling IT hub of Gurgaon on the outskirts of the country's capital (Delhi), Tinder India began to further expand its already substantial regional

presence[29]. Tinder was the kind of disruptive technology sensation that startup tech founders dreamt of. Just two years after their launch in 2012,[30] the app gained downloads and spread by word of mouth to acquire over 10 million users around the world by 2014 (Stampler, 2014). Around this time, a *Wired* magazine article described the right-swipe to accept or reject profiles popularized by Tinder as "the prevailing signifier of our generation - shorthand for like, lust, and (possibly, hopefully, finally) love" (Pierce, 2016).

Hoping to match and perhaps even exceed the success of Tinder, a number of 'local' Indian dating apps cropped up between 2013 and 2015 (examples of these include Woo, Vee, TrueMango, Twango, TrulyMadly, Aisle, DesiCrush). During this period, several of these companies received substantial financial backing in seed and Series A funding. For example, Truly Madly received $5.7 million USD in Series A funding from two Venture Capital firms: Kae Capital and Helion Ventures[31]. The proliferation of these region-specific apps between 2013 and 2016 and the multiple investors that placed bets on their success, captures a dominant belief within the digital-tech corporate sphere around this time that there was an unfulfilled need in the market for dating platforms designed, specifically for local Indian needs. This sentiment is captured succinctly by Sachin Bhatia in an interview with TechCrunch in 2015, when he said – "Facebook is India's Facebook and Twitter is India's Twitter, but Tinder won't be India's Tinder" (Russell, 2015). According to Sachin, Tinder would "never be India's Tinder" because

[29] At this point India was already Tinder's largest market in Asia (Chaturvedi, 2016).

[30] After a short period of incubation within Hatch Labs in San Francisco.

[31] By 2018, funding for local dating apps had dried up significantly.

in his opinion the cultural politics surrounding intimacy in India would be too much for a global corporation to comprehend.

To a certain degree, Sachin's provocation seemed like it might turn out to be true in the early days after Tinder's launch. Although things quickly changed and Tinder's brand in India became hugely popular, I want to draw attention to the growing pains of the company in the months after they set up their regional office. At the time, Tinder struggled to present a vision of intimate possibility on their platform that aligned with the values of their userbase. The journey of Tinder India (as a corporate presence) getting to know its local users was filled with friction and feedback.

I examine some of the issues driving this friction by looking closely at the first ad campaign Tinder India released and the public and media response to it. While Tinder had been available for download in India since 2013, it was only several months after they opened their first Indian office in 2016 that the company released their first advertisement targeting local consumers. This video began with a young Indian woman standing in front of a floor length mirror in a large light filled bedroom getting dressed for a daytime Tinder date. As she contemplated whether to include a *dupatta* (scarf) in her outfit for the occasion, her mother entered the room and noticed a Tinder message on her daughter's phone that was lying on the bed. Glancing at the phone, the mother smiled knowingly and proceeded to give her approval to both her daughter's choice of outfit and choice to use Tinder, saying "From my side, how do you say…this is a... right swipe".

Figure 8 - Screenshot from Sanskari ad showing a woman getting ready for a Tinder date, while her mother watches (Heilpern, 2016).

The video was dubbed by national media as the *Sanskari* ad. Sanskari is a Hindi word with Sanskrit origins broadly refers to an adherence to traditional cultural values and is usually associated with performances of Hindu piety. The moniker that was assigned to the video by the media highlights the video's emphasis on cultural propriety while dating. The markers of *sanskar* in the ad were both the conservative clothing choices and family-based decision making in romantic endeavors, which fit neatly into stereotypes of what a "good" Indian woman should look and behave like. The woman preparing to go on the Tinder date represented how Tinder envisioned its imagined user (or at the very least the kind of woman its imagined users would aspire to be). The woman in the Sanskari advertisement embodies several characteristics of the kind of "new Indian woman" Munshi (1998) observed in advertisements during the 1990s, in that both kinds of women were fair, seemingly upper caste, and their femininity was defined by their 'Indianness' (in attire and relationship with family in the case of the Sanskari ad).

The Sanskari ad was subjected to biting criticism across social media and traditional news media networks such as Business Insider, BBC and BuzzFeed for being painfully out of touch, unrealistic and patronizing towards its local consumer base. In addition, social media was filled with tweets, posts, and comments about the video. Across both social and mainstream media, displeasure was primarily directed at Tinder for presenting dating in India as a family approved activity devoid of any sexual undertones (Scroll, 2016).

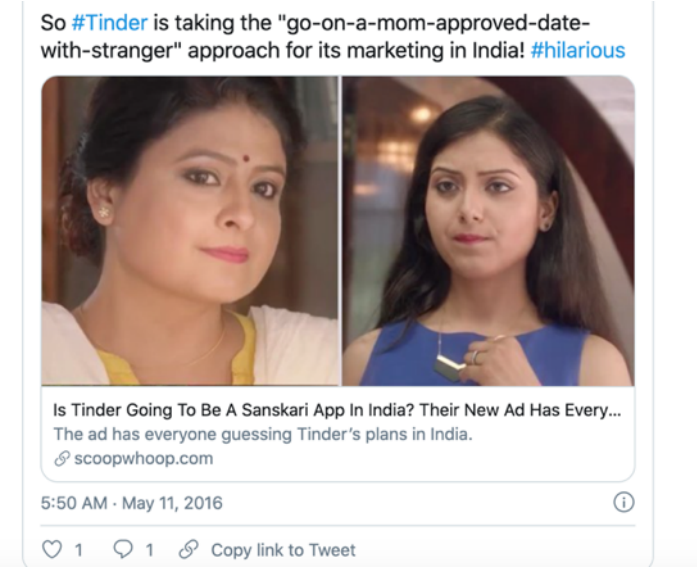

Figure 9 - A tweet making fun of the ad with the #hilarious. The tweet references a story about the Sanskari ad from digital media company Scoop Whoop. (Heilpern, 2016)

Figure 10 - A tweet calling the Sanskari ad "cringe" and "out of sync". (Heilpern, 2016).

Following the release of the ad, the head of Tinder India, Taru Kapoor, defended her company's decisions to depict dating the way it did in the video. Yet, the Sanskari video was quietly removed from Tinder's official YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter page all within a few weeks of its original release. The public reaction to the Sanskari ad illustrates the platform's

early unfamiliarity with its audience, or at least their inability to create an ad campaign that reflected their understanding of the experiences of the people in India using Tinder (i.e. people who were urban, educated, upwardly mobile, young and English speaking).

A moment exemplifying this tense relationship between Tinder and its users took place at a panel discussion in Mumbai in 2016[32], several months after the Sanskari ad campaign when a member of the audience confronted the head of Tinder India about the app's approach towards Indian users. The panel discussion took place at Godrej Culture Lab in Vikhroli, Mumbai late in the afternoon. Participating in the panel were both Taru Kapoor (the head of Tinder India) and Sachin Bhatia (co-founder of TrulyMadly). Attending the event were approximately two hundred highly educated, upwardly mobile Mumbaikars. During the hour-long discussion on the way dating apps were changing relationships in India, Taru Kapoor emphasized Tinder's ability to give Indians "a platform to express themselves". Throughout the discussion she followed Tinder's corporate policy of only referring to the app as a "social discovery platform".

In a separate conversation with a person from Tinder, this policy was explained to me in the following language –

> We don't market ourselves as a dating app or casual sex app anywhere in the world. We say that we are a way to meet people. Full Stop. We are creating a life that gives you a lot more control, it gives you these alternatives and options to meet people that you will not meet otherwise…We are a social discovery platform.

[32] I had helped organize the event as part of my time spent at the lab that summer. I was particularly excited about being able to bring together upper-level executives from the two apps, with people producing media about dating, and a live audience.

Thus, the corporate presentation of Tinder as a social discovery platform is seen across multiple avenues (e.g. its official branding from its blogs to advertisements) that even in the west remain explicitly vague about the 'purpose' of the app

At the end of the panel, when the floor opened for audience questions, a young man stood up and asked Taru Kapoor "Why are you so scared of the word hookup? Just say it. You are a hookup app!" There was loud applause from the audience in response to his comment, followed by a moment of tense silence. Taru Kapoor did not seem particularly taken aback by the comment, at least not outwardly so. She responded by skirting over the crux of his question (Why are you so scared of the word hook-up?) and instead used her allocated two minutes response time to swiftly summarize the many possible functions Tinder might have for a user (e.g. friendship, self-discovery etc.). As a public figure representing a huge digital company, Taru Kapoor was adept at dealing with problematic user pushback and public critiques.

While companies like Tinder collect and analyze vast amounts of user data, this information is anonymized and filtered through various surveys and departments (Ward, 2017). The interaction between the young audience member and Taru Kapoor was notable in that it was a rare instance of an individual dating app user directly speaking to a key decision maker of the large behemoth that is Tinder - and asking for an immediate response. By directly asking the question of *why* Tinder is afraid of the word hookup, the audience member effectively opposed Tinder's framing because of its identity as a social discovery platform because it invalidated their personal experiences. That the event was taking place in an elite, upper class, with a self-selecting group of people that were interested and available to spend an afternoon listening to conversations about sex and technology, reflects the kind of userbase the push for Tinder calling itself a hookup app might come from.

The idea of Tinder as a platform associated with "hook-up culture", and casual sex appears to be important for Indian users - just not in the way that Tinder originally imagined. For example, in the summer of 2016 an art project by a then relatively unknown children's book illustrator Indu Harikumar got significant media attention. Her personal artistic project titled *#100 Indian Tinder Tales* featured illustrations of amusing, sad, poignant and mundane stories of real people's sexual encounters via Tinder accompanied by a short written vignette. She began the series by drawing on her own personal experiences, then, as her project started gaining popularity on social media, people started sending in their personal stories to be illustrated. Almost overnight Indu Harikumar received a flurry of requests by both national and international media outlets who covered her project under headlines like – "Tinder Illustrated, The Indian Edition" and "Move over, Tinder ad: This artist is curating real Indian dating tales" (a not-so-subtle jab ay Tinder's Sanskari ad described earlier). When I asked Indu Harikumar about why she though #100IndianTales had grained such traction in the media, she simply responded by saying "Sex sells in India".

Tinder's corporate desire to avoid being associated with casual sex in India leads to friction between the app's vision of itself and its public image. This friction is particularly significant given the attention to female behavior and sexuality over digital communication technologies and ideas about gendered propriety. In my interviews with eighteen middle class urban women (including Akanksha mentioned in Chapter 1) about their use of dating apps, all of them spoke about how simply being on Tinder felt like a form of sexual liberation because of associations of the platform with casual sex. This is not to say that there are not multiple uses of Tinder, but rather the ability to claim sexual agency by being on the app allows women in

particular to engage in a form of everyday resistance[33] against societal expectations - and this is in part what gives Tinder its symbolic power and cultural relevance.

"To be young is to be on Tinder": Switching gears through Adulting Can Wait

By the end of 2018 when I returned to India for a longer stint of fieldwork – Tinder had effectively altered their approach in the country and cemented their presence as the leading dating app in the Indian market. Tinder's approach towards the Indian market shifted significantly between 2016 and 2019 (when they became the top grossing social and lifestyle app on android devices in India). When Elie Seidman the then newly appointed CEO of Tinder Global visited IIT-Delhi[34] in 2019 as part of an Asia-Pacific Public Relations tour, he gave a keynote speech that captured the essence of Tinder's shift in approach from 2016. The college is also the alma mater of Tinder India's head (Taru Kapoor).

On February 1st, 2019, I visited Dogra Hall at IIT-Delhi to attend Elie Seidman's lecture. After collecting a bright pink 'entry' wristband from a kiosk outside, I made my way to a mustard yellow seat mid-way between the stage and an exit door. Placed on the seat was a rolled-up t-shirt in thick grey cotton with the words *#swipelife* written on the back in white letters. Around twenty minutes after I arrived, Elie Seidman walked onto the stage and began his talk on the state of the dating industry in Asia to a three-hundred-person audience (of mostly male IIT students). His talk centered around the power of young people to change the world. In

[33] See Sivaramakrishnan (2005) for a detailed intellectual genealogy of the concept of everyday resistance.

[34] IIT's are a highly competitive, male dominated, prestigious set of engineering colleges in India. IIT-Delhi's campus is in the southern part of the city. Its large, manicured lawns occupy prime real estate and sprawl over 50 acres, containing a mixture of cement and brick buildings.

this context he offered Tinder as the platform that would allow them to embark on making this change. He announced that the future of Tinder in India was for "generational experience seekers" while waving his hand in the general direction of the audience. He continued saying –

> We are always interested in innovating for what young people want in this incredible and formative phase of their life. Finding, exploring, discovering phase, we are focusing and celebrating that.

Elie Seidman repeated these statements (with slight variations of course) in the many media interviews he would participate in the upcoming days with journalists from outlets such as the Hindustan Times, Bloomberg Quint and Economic Times. In many of these interviews he referred to Tinder India's new branding campaign (its largest in the region) *Adulting Can Wait,* as a concrete example of the affect of "finding, exploring, discovering" that Tinder wanted to encapsulate as the essence of its platform.

Describing the Adulting Can Wait campaign's eponymous video ad in interview with *Social Samosa* in 2018, Taru Kapoor said –

> Tinder represents endless possibilities where each right swipe opens up a new world of unique possibilities. Every swipe is a new connection, a potential epic memory or a valuable lesson in self-discovery. The film captures all the potential connections and social interactions, which eventually shape our world views as well as self-identity, that Tinder can facilitate (Social Samosa, 2018)

Expanding on the thought process behind the video further in the same interview, the Creative Director of the ad agency responsible for the campaign commented –

> Tinder is more than just an app that enables 'dating'. It's a plethora of life experiences and a whole lot of fun. That's the spirit we wanted to capture with our new campaign –

> tailor-made for a young and restless generation that doesn't want to commit to adult choices (Social Samosa, 2018)

And Samrat Singh the marketing head of Tinder more directly stated, in an interview with me at Tinder's co-working space in Gurgaon in 2018, that the branding for the campaign was about trying to "own" whatever young people cared about –

> Initially when we only defined *it* as dating or relationships…very soon we would run out of stuff to do right? Then we just followed the user and saw what the user was engaging with. And we want to own that. We want to own that, right…

Across all three of the quotes above we see a clear rebranding of Tinder from the time of its first *Sanskari* ad. Rather than offering parent approved dating, Tinder now presents itself as a digital platform that can be whatever young people want it to be. What remains consistent between both branding initiatives is that purpose of Tinder remains framed as being about much more that casual sex and hookups. At the same time, the subtle references to "avoiding adult life choices" in the Adulting Can Wait campaign leaves room for its audience to attribute the sexual passion and exploration associated with young romance to the intended purpose of the platform. In contrast to this seeming expansion of user agency, we see how the company approaches users through the language of ownership. By wanting to "own the right" to whoever young people are, and whatever they want Tinder repositions the boundary of its intended audience to include not just young people, but anyone who associates with the feeling of being young.

At this point, it is worth contextualizing the shift towards "youth culture" by Tinder in India within decisions made at the level of its global headquarters and the larger portfolio of the conglomerate it belongs to. Tinder is the crown jewel of the Match Group, an IT conglomerate that owns the largest portfolio of dating apps in the world and nearly monopolizes the dating app

industry (Hartmans & Akhtar, 2021). At times focusing on media reports, interview quotes, and ad campaigns about Tinder India, it became easy to forget the complex mechanizations of the behemoth that is the Match Group. Tinder's seemingly 'region specific decisions' were often tied to larger developments in broader acquisitions made by its parent company.

For instance, early in 2018, Tinder's parent company completed its acquisition of Hinge, a relationship focused dating app that had been one of Tinder's major competitors in India (Hartmans & Akhtar, 2021). For seven years, Hinge had framed itself as an alternative to Tinder by matching people based on their mutual friends, explicitly identifying itself as a "relationship app" and decentralizing gamification in its UX (Perez, 2019a). Following Match/IAC's[35] acquisition of Hinge, Tinder changed its advertising strategy globally and leaned into Tinder as a platform for fun and exploration in a way the platform had thus far never had never done. Technology journalists covering these changes hypothesized that this shift in global strategy came from Match Group's effective control over the "relationship" market as a result of the Hinge acquisition (Wells, 2018; Perez, 2019a; Hartmans & Akhtar, 2021).

While Tinder's shift to be more "youth focused" was not limited to just its Indian audience, the steps the company took in the region were certainly notable. For example, in the summer of 2018, Tinder rolled out a feature called "Tinder-U" where only college students with a college email address could sign up and choose to swipe with only those people who attended their school or were nearby (Perez, 2018b). India was the only non-western country in which this feature was *first* rolled out. Other notable developments by Tinder while making a shift to trying to appeal to young people included a billboard campaign in major Indian metros that "remade"

[35] InterActive Corp. (IAC) and Match Group were a publicly traded company together company together until 2020.

popular memes, a new card game called 'Adulting Can Wait' that loosely follows the format of Cards Against Humanity, collaborating with Buzzfeed India on a video series about Indian women's' experiences[36], as well as the Adulting Can Wait video that was briefly mentioned earlier.

I now turn to the Adulting Can Wait video because it is a succinct summary of a shift in Tinder's approach and can be directly contrasted with Sanskari ad released by the platform just two years earlier. The Adulting Can Wait video begins with, a young woman (played by actress and singer Anjali Sivaraman) opening the Tinder app and escaping into a maze from a crowded courtyard in the middle of an IT tech park.

Figure 11 - Screenshot of woman entering the Tinder maze (Tinder India, 2018)

As can be seen in the image above Anjali is sporting a short bob and dressed in western clothing - a blush pink jacket and a dark red colored maxi skirt. Upon entering the maze, Anjali gestures the "swipe" motion to engage with or escape from different scenarios presented to her within its walled hedges. Among the scenarios she encounters are – an outdoor indie rock/pop

[36] The series is called GirlsFeed

concert filled with ethnically ambiguous men and women, a cute boy jumping on a trampoline (who turns out to be interested in men), a group of cuddly golden retriever puppies, and people playing paintball. All while a song with the chorus "to be or not to be, fairytale fantasies" plays in the background[37]. Towards the end of the video, Anjali finally makes her way out of the maze and emerges back onto the busy square she started from. At this point, the music has faded, and she is surrounded by skyscrapers and people dressed in work clothes. After looking around at her surroundings, Anjali says "not today", gestures a right swipe, and re-enters the maze as the song starts playing again. The final shot in the video is the camera zooming out from Anjali in the maze as the maze turns into Tinder's logo (Tinder India, 2018).

At first glance, there appears to be a stark difference between the Tinder's vision of dating encapsulated in this advertisement and the one I had seen two and a half years ago in the infamous *Sanskari* video. In the Adulting Can Wait video, there is no reference to family obligation or parental approval. Additionally, the clothing choices of the female protagonists in the two videos differ – the dupatta and kajal worn by the woman preparing to go on a Tinder date in the Sanskari ad has been replaced by a blush pink leather jacket, short, bobbed hair and sneakers worn by the young woman wandering through a maze full of new possibilities in the Adulting Can Wait campaign. Despite these differences, the vision of femininity represented by the woman in Tinder's Sanskari and Adulting Can Wait ads are both reminiscent of established archetypes of ideal female behavior. In the 1990s, displays of scantily clad, westernized, thin, upper caste Indian bodies in beauty pageants, advertisements, movies, and other media products became symbolic of what this "new Indian woman" was supposed to look like. Both the Sanskari

[37] The song was sung by the same actress in the video.

and Adulting Can Wait ads feature women who are fair and seemingly upper caste. At the same time, both ads try to balance the "westernization" implicitly associated with dating apps attributes that seem distinctively Indian. The Sanskari ad does that by having its protagonist choose to wear traditional Indian attire (salwar kameez, kajal, dupatta). The Adulting Can Wait ad does this more indirectly through its broader campaigns that includes Buzzfeed series discussing Indian women's experiences and Indianized versions of memes (as demonstrated below).

Figure 12 - The base image for the viral "Is This a Pigeon?" meme

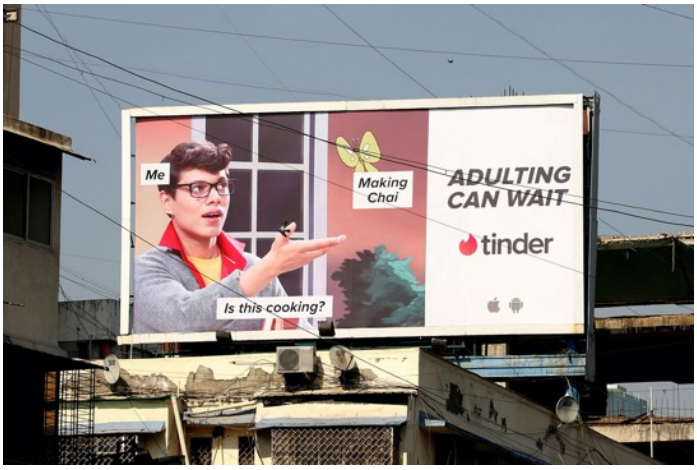

Figure 13 - The recreated "Is This a Pigeon?" meme by Tinder, that tries to emphasize the app's knowledge of both the Indian experience (making chai to demonstrate cooking ability) and global youth culture (through appropriate use of the meme itself).

Adaptive Enclosures on TrulyMadly and Tinder

The video advertisements, public relation campaigns and interviews discussed in this chapter show how both TrulyMadly and Tinder try to package and capitalize on the idea of discovery of new intimate possibilities through digital platforms when trying to appeal to their new imagined userbase in the country. In its early videos, such as Creep Qawwali and Watchboyz, TrulyMadly presented the essence of dating on their app as a safe space where women could playfully discover men by "boy browsing". In contrast, Tinder's initial foray into the Indian market through its *Sanskari* ad framed the discovery of intimate possibility over the app as something that distinctly was non-sexual (and family approved). Their approach morphed over the years as they grew to understand the Indian audience and by 2018, Tinder had switched to offer "finding, exploring, discovering" associated with youthfulness as what its platform gave a space for its users to engage in.

Both TrulyMadly's and Tinder's marketing approaches illustrate how 'enclosures' emerge through discourse about who apps are for and the ways in which they should be used. In TrulyMadly's video advertisements, the app itself was advertised as an enclosure that could protect women from the threat of uncouth men. By joining TrulyMadly women were offered the opportunity to "boy browse" without concern that they might be subject to the unwanted advances of 'creepy' men. Thus the app was framed as an enclosure whose digital borders were protected through heavily advertised processes of verification. Although never explicitly stated, the 'creep' appeared to repeatedly occupy a lower-class position in contrast with the cosmopolitan upper to upper middle class female users (and their male counterparts) imagined as the ideal userbase. Assigning the many real dangers of violence that the Indian women face on the abstract figure of the creep allowed TrulyMadly to adapt the boundaries of their app's

intended use to allow women to express their sexual impulses while ensuring they would not be contaminated by the unwanted intimacies of lower-class males. These narratives of protection and purity are rooted in deep regional histories and discourses idealizing visions of femininity captured in the figure of the suitably modern Indian woman.

In Tinder's case, we see the company shift its presentation of who their platform is for as it tries to appeal to younger users (who are in college or right out of college). Here, I offer the reminder that the kind of bodies defining 'youth culture' for Tinder are predominantly upper class, English speaking, affluent, cosmopolitan, technologically savvy, and educated. While this makes sense for Tinder as a company from a profit maximizing standpoint of being able to effectively reach the kind of people that they can most easily "bring onto" the platform, it is nonetheless worth considering how the idea of 'who dating is for' gets sanitized in the process. For instance, in Tinder's 2018 *Adulting Can Wait* campaign, the app is visually depicted as a particular kind of enclosure - a maze within which users can get lost and escape the mundanity of their daily lives. Who is allowed into the "fairytale fantasy" of the maze as the lyrics that accompany the video suggest are only those who are culturally competent with significantly classed norms of dating. In other words, both Tinder and TrulyMadly discursive shape their platforms as digital enclosures where the restrictions of the real world do not exist. At the same time, who gets invited into the enclosure of the app and the price of entry into the platform is carefully moderated by the app and rooted in dominant regional discourses about gendered and classed behaviors.

Significantly, the boundaries of these enclosures are adaptive - they are repositioned by app companies to fit around user demands (and in the case of Tinder, respond to conglomerate level acquisitions). At TrulyMadly, the founders were surprised at the way in which women

using their app were sexually explicit in their interactions. Their surprise at women "dirty talking" informed their marketing and branding efforts. The fact that Indian women face significant threats of male violence should not be taken lightly. At the same time, I argue that it is worth noting how restructuring digital enclosures and claiming that the apps can assure 'safety' works to sanitize sexual desire. What desires are considered acceptable, with whom they are acceptable, and the way in which people can approach dating becomes packaged and commoditized. A clear example of this can be seen in TrulyMadly's idea to 'teach men' how to chat to women on the app through an add-on premium service.

Unlike TrulyMadly, whose process of enclosure remained largely consistent between 2016 and 2018, Tinder India repositioned the boundary of who their app was for significantly during the same period. This shift was likely a partial result of acquisitions of the conglomerate it belonged to and a partial response to 'getting to know its audience better' after the backlash against their initial Sanskari approach. Between 2016 and 2019, Tinder's use in India skyrocketed at least in part by repositioning the bounds of its digital enclosure around natural user formations (i.e. "owning whatever eighteen- to twenty-seven-year-olds engage with").

Conclusion

Both Tinder's and TrulyMadly's strategy of identifying a niche user demographic (upper middle class urban women for TrulyMadly, and young people for Tinder) and basing marketing approaches on that particular group's interests, is not new. Rather, it is precisely because these approaches are so mundane and normalized that they are worth paying attention to. They show how the 'taken for granted' assumptions within marketing create discursive regimes through which intimate possibilities on digital platforms get bound. In the process of creating these

discursive regimes through company produced public facing material, both Taru Kapoor and Sachin Bhatia use their embodied experiences of "being Indian" as a way to claim *knowledge* of what imagined users in the region want. For example, Sachin Bhatia uses the language of "we Indian men" when making claims about the need for men to be 'taught' how to interact with women. And Taru Kapoor, in public interviews, talks about how her experiences as an Indian woman helps her viscerally know and feel the issues users struggle with. Whether these beliefs are true or not, did not matter to me as much as recognizing how both international and region-specific dating apps try and claim the ability of their platforms to meet the intimate needs of an Indian audience through the lived experiences of its executives. Therefore, to this end I consider intimacy X enclosure at the level of gendered ideals surrounding desirability and boundaries surrounding an app's intended use through advertising and media narratives.

It is crucial however to understand how ideas about these digital platforms (verification, discovery, safety, choice) get built into the app. It is these sets of concerns that I take up in the next chapter. There I write in more detail about the implications of producers working with technological and corporate systems that continue to classify and categorize based on narrow, marketable and commodifiable visions of intimate possibility. Illouz (2007) notes that in general online dating sites frame the user as simultaneously an individual with extreme agency (to choose) and one with limited agency (to act as commodity on display). In doing so, dating sites construct the romantic encounter as the result of the best possible presentation of self and the best possible choice by algorithmic decision-making systems. Therefore, it is to the ways in which affordances of dating apps are designed that I turn to in the next chapter.

Chapter 3
Measuring and moderating queerness on Delta

On February 23rd, 2019 I attended a seminar about "emotional resilience building" for the Indian queer community at the Lalit hotel in central Delhi. I entered the gated premises of the luxury five-star hotel on foot, having walked from the metro station a couple of blocks away. First, I dropped my leather satchel through an X-Ray machine and walked through a metal detector. Then I entered the busy hotel lobby and made my way down a wooden staircase to a large room with recessed lighting and thirty or so people sitting on white chairs facing a raised platform. Standing on the platform, behind a lectern, was Ishaan Sethi, the founder of LBGTQIA+ dating app - *Delta*.

Ishaan was in his late twenties, dressed in a tailored navy suit jacket with a white shirt. He spoke with a distinct American lilt that he had acquired during his time as an undergraduate student at Brown University. Sachin Bhatia (the co-founder of TrulyMadly whose platform was one of the focuses of the previous chapter) had described Ishaan as "a young driving force". In my meetings with Ishaan at Delta's office and at events like this, Ishaan had lived up to his reputation - always excited to talk about his vision for Delta's future within the app economy and evolving state of queer politics in the country.

Ishaan launched Delta a couple of months before Section 377 of the Indian penal code was repealed by the Supreme Court in September 2018. This Section of the penal code had been used to effectively criminalize homosexuality in the country, and after its repeal there was significant media scrutiny on the role of dating apps in shaping what "queer love" in a "post-377

India" might look like. The repeal held both an immense personal significance for me as a bisexual Indian woman and served as a unique backdrop to study corporate reactions to this sociolegal change within the app space.

Projected on the screen behind Ishaan at the Lalit workshop was the (rather long) title of the event – “It Gets Better By Queering The Pitch: An interactive Workshop On Community Building in post 377 India & Emotional and Mental Well-being of the LGBTQ+ community”. Delta was a key corporate partner of the event, and the app’s logo - a rainbow Venn diagram composed of overlapping multicolored circles with the letter “D” at the center was prominently displayed at the bottom of the screen. Ishaan opened the workshop by describing his company’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 ...

As he spoke, I typed the words “homegrown for and by Indians" and “all sorts of identities” into my phone’s note taking app. The phrases were familiar to me; as they were used nearly verbatim throughout the app's official website, social media posts, and Apple Store and Google Play descriptions.

Figure 14 - Screenshot of the opening page of Delta's website (DeltaApp, 2018)

Emphasizing national identity (or Indianness) of its production team by using phrases such as "homegrown" and "for Indians, by Indians" was a way for Delta to quickly claim greater legitimacy as a dating platform in the region. Their decision to emphasize being "homegrown" in their branding immediately sets them apart from multiple international apps, all struggling to claim a niche in India's competitive mobile and online dating landscape. Alongside the emphasis on Indianness, Delta made the rather unique decision to target Indian users across the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. By framing itself as an app for people from "all sorts of identities" rather than focusing on a specific sexual orientation within the LGBTQIA+ umbrella, Delta deviated from industry norms where the vast majority of non-heterosexual dating apps cater to gay men, with a much smaller subset focused on users who are women desiring women. Delta's unique position as the first India specific dating app stating "queerness" as opposed to a specific sexual orientation as the key identity characteristic of their imagined user base had caught my attention, following Delta's public launch in early 2018 (Agarwal, 2017; Singh, 2017).

At the Lalit hotel, over the four hours of the *It Gets Better By Queering The Pitch* workshop, a Canadian psychologist visiting Delhi ran through a PowerPoint deck with tips on

how to deal with dysphoria, family pressures and other mental health needs that queer people might struggle with as a result of continued social stigmatization (despite the decriminalization of homosexuality). At the beginning of the workshop, I took careful notes about everything that was being said ("What is dysphoria", "How to find community", "Where are safe spaces"). However, by about half-way through the day's program, I had shifted from diligent note taking to abstractedly doodling early versions of the two questions that would come to guide this chapter. The first being about, how ideas about user safety, digital design, and app success intersect with the history of queer politics in the region. The second being about how notions of "digitality" get mobilized by a new queer dating app trying to navigate the push-and-pull between Indians' desire for recognition of their sexual orientation and their resistance to neatly categorizing their sexual desires.

To explore answers to these questions, I use information gathered from a mixture of in person interviews, group interviews, and participant observation at a broad range of "queer events" (e.g. an LGBTQ youth festival, queer pride parades in 2016 and 2018, art gallery exhibitions). More specifically, in 2016 and 2017 I spoke to executives leading heterosexual dating apps in the country about what a gay or lesbian app with a corporate presence in India might look like. When I arrived for my final round of fieldwork, following the decriminalization of Section 377 in 2018, I spent time in the offices of Delta. Over the course of two days at their offices I conducted interviews with the founder and CEO of Delta, its software development team, its UX (User Experience) lead and head of marketing. All the people quoted by name in this chapter (like in the rest of the dissertation) are public facing individuals. In addition, I attended two events sponsored by Delta as well as met with the company's marketing head for a more informal and collaboratory discussion about queer advertising. Secondary material I

analyzed while writing the chapter consisted predominantly of legal proceedings, reports by advocacy and civil society groups, newspaper articles, magazine articles, advertisements, and social media posts (by queer rights advocacy groups and Delta).

In this chapter I build on two interrelated streams of scholarship. One has to do with discussions about how dimensions of queer identity get enacted and negotiated in virtual space. The other centers the ways in which the forms, features, and functions of mobile apps influence peoples' everyday interactions through these technologies. In this chapter I bring together these two avenues of research and extended them by providing an empirical analysis situated in India's particular cultural and political context – a region of the world in which the peculiarities of emerging queer digital industry have not received scholarly attention.

Situating the norm building work of dating app design within a remarkable cultural moment (the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2018), I argue that Delta tends to simplify the messiness of queer intimacies and emphasizes the virtue of identity performances that most easily fit into established app development metrics. By examining how queer dating is made real by Delta, I note that the company tries to stabilize the boundaries of queer identity through practices of user measurement and moderation. Here, I offer that what is lost in the process of transforming the queer body into app data is space for play and the strategic ambiguity necessary to skirt normative classificatory standards of sexual desires.

The structure of the chapter is as follows - I begin by elaborating on how anthropologists studying queer cultures in the global south have theorized global/local dynamics. Then, I briefly explain where I align within these perspectives and how I situate my research in conversation with these approaches by focusing on production cultures within the dating app industry. Following this, I trace the evolution of queer rights activism between the late 1980s (at the height

of the HIV-AIDS crisis) into the present, noting how media/technology shifts informed public discourse about queerness. Within these shifts, I observe how Delta emerges as an important player in the dating app ecosystem around the time of Section 377s repeal. Analyzing the issues Delta deals with while designing and managing their platform, I show how the idea of queerness as an open, fluid expansive mode of imagining intimate potentiality is resistant to the kind of self-disclosure demanded by dating apps like Delta. By paying attention to how Delta's founder deals with the legacy of criminalization of homosexuality and internalized fears of state sanctioned violence, I observe how regional histories of queer politics and personal experiences are drawn upon to guide corporate decisions.

Queerness, Digitality, Localization

In this chapter, I consider both queerness and digitality not as discrete categories, but mutually constitutive. My perspective on queerness and digitality inspired by Shah's (2015) writing about mobile phones as queer technologies that "transcend, transgress and render different bodies and events as queer" (p. 282). For Shah (2015), the fuzzy boundaries between digital avatars and physical identities in the determination of what counts as queer provides a lens to approach a digital technology's ability to circumvent and resist established authoritarian heterosexual modes of expression as queer in of itself. For instance, in his chapter *Queer mobiles and mobile queers: intersections, vectors and movements in India*, Shah expands on the analytical value of approaching queerness and digitality as interconnected by breaking down the events surrounding a case in the 2000s in Lucknow where policemen joined gay dating website Planet Romeo to arrest gay men on the site. In this instance, the only evidence indicating

"queerness" of the men arrested were in the digital traces they left behind through their communication on the dating site.

Even though half of the men who were arrested were closeted with wives and children, their virtual presence on Planet Romeo was used by the state to ignore evidence of their "straightness" in the physical world (i.e. their public social relationships with their families) in the legal trial that followed. Therefore, Shah considers how simply having traces of one's identity on a digital platform like Planet Romeo can become enough evidence of queerness to override contradictory information of one's sexual orientation in the physical world[38]. A possible way to expand on this discussion beyond simply recognizing that queerness and digitality are deeply intertwined issues, is to pay attention to the *production* of digital technologies that become understood as queer. At Delta, this involves the app trying to design elusive equilibrium between ensuring safety of the physical bodies of queer users and encouraging them to have freedom of choice in how they represent themselves digitally.

Part of the difficulty of mobilizing queerness within app design according to app producers in the ecosystem are the peculiarities of the Indian context. Founders, software developers, and UX designers working on dating apps in Delhi and Bangalore often emphasized that dating as a queer person in India was fundamentally different from dating as a queer person abroad[39]. When pressed on what the crux of this difference might be, the taboo nature of both

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[38] Interestingly the sexual orientation of the police officers who joined the Planet Romeo "pretending" to be gay was never scrutinized – though it should have been by the logic the courts used for the arrested men.

[39] Most individuals I spoke to working in the dating app ecosystem identified as heterosexual and talked about their perceptions of what LGBTQ might look like. Perhaps surprisingly, their perceptions matched those of the remarks of the small number of people who self-identified as LGBTQ and worked within the dating app industry (including marketing and advertising).

dating and queer identity came up repeatedly. For instance, a UX designer working as a contractor for multiple dating app startups explained to me one afternoon as we sat in a coffee shop in Khan Market in Delhi that "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." By 'here' he was referring to India, and 'there' signaled the 'west' more broadly. However, exactly where the boundaries of "here" ended and whose needs were considered foreign, remained less clear. Later in the chapter, I go on to discuss some characteristics that are commonly used to signal "local" queer needs at Delta. However, the question I focus on is about how vague ideas of localness influence decisions. In other words, this chapter is about how *perceptions* of differences in queer experiences (whether real or imagined) influence design, financing, and advertising decisions.

In the 1980s questions of cultural similarity and difference were at the forefront of ethnographic scholarship about non-western queer experiences. During this period, research tended to focus on the study of ritualized same sex and third-gender cultures in the global south (Dave, 2012). Until the mid-nineties, the dominant theoretical framework grounding such studies of queer culture was Tomlinson's (1991/1999) cultural imperialism model. Broadly summarized, the model postulated a 'west to rest' flow of cultural hegemony driven by capitalist neo-liberal systems of power. Although the model was valuable in that it acknowledged the dynamic nature of cross-cultural flows of power, the model often resulted in studies of non-western gay and lesbian experiences being limited by a rather circular debate regarding the degree to which they were 'same or different' from that of their 'western counterparts'.

Historians and ethnographers drawing on critical cultural theory offered two ways out of the circular bind posed by the cultural imperialism model. In the Indian context, one way out was

provided by historians who helped build a canon of gay and lesbian studies that was *not* premised on cultural alterity but rather emphasized the long, rich and textured regional history of queerness. For instance, Thadani (1996/2016), Vanita & Kidwai (2000) and Vanita (2005) provide accounts of the rich pre-colonial history of male and female same-sex desires in India, and by doing so offer the take that regional circumstances do not always demand cultural comparison. Appadurai (1996) offered another way out of the cultural imperialism model bind, by suggesting that it was precisely the tension between 'similarity and difference' or 'global and local' that was the *site* to explore identity experiences. Appadurai's (1996) writing described the global cultural economy as a series of overlapping, yet distinct, flows (of media, technology, money, people, and ideas). These mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, ethnoscapes and ideoscapes together led to the phenomenon of globalization.

During the 2010s, ethnographers drew on Appadurai's model of global cultural flow to theoretically ground their accounts of queer cultures in non-western spaces. These accounts focused on exploring the *everyday* dynamics underlying queer experiences in the global South. For example, Boellstorff (2004) discusses how Indonesian queer identity is mediated by magazines, exploring how the language and imagery within Indonesian gay and 'lesbi' zines evoke queer desire as something that is both region specific and universal. Relatedly, Benedicto (2014) examines the way in which built environments structure queer experiences in Manila by analyzing the ways in which the city's transportation system (highways, roads) and architecture (airports, commercial hubs, party districts, etc.) organized the lives of upper-class gay men navigating their economic privilege in a deeply classed society[40].

[40] See also Horton's (2018) presentation of queerness as an alternative to natal kinship in his time spent with gay men in Mumbai deciding whether or not to come out to family members. And Brainer's (2019) argument that ideas

Even as Appadurai's (1996) conceptualization of global 'flows' across media, finances, people, technologies, and ideas helped push cultural difference from an object of study to a site to examine broader concepts, its legacy in queer ethnographies remains largely limited to analyses of individual experience. Taking a slightly different focus, I shift the site of analysis to production practices within an emerging dating app industry trying to capitalize on a unique moment in the sociolegal landscape, the repeal of Section 377. I ground my questions about the versions of queerness and digitality that get emphasized and the versions that get sidelined by Delta as they wrangle with effectively placing their platforms as the future of queer dating in the region, within a longer regional history of LGBTQ activism.

Situating app production cultures within a history of LGBTQ activism in India

On September 6th, 2018 the Supreme Court of India made a significant ruling. It struck down Section 377 of the India Penal Code. This section was based on the "English 1534 Anti Buggery Act" and was written into Indian criminal law by Lord Babington Macaulay during the early 1860s. The colonial law criminalized "carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal."[41] (Gupta, 2006; Dequen, 2020). Although the section had rarely been used in actual prosecutions because for claims to actually be applicable in court one would need to not only prove that people being tried had the intention of having sex, but also that penetrative activity (proving "carnal intercourse") between members of the same sex had

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of what counts as 'success' in a global world deeply influences the family dynamics between parents and their LGBTQ identifying children in Taiwan.

[41] Versions of this law can also be found instituted in the penal codes of (former) British Colonies like Singapore, Brunei, Seychelles, Papua New Guinea (Gupta, 2006).

actually taken place, both state institutions and private individuals in India have used it as a tool to police sexual behavior through harassment, extortion and violence (P. Singh, 2016; Hanna, 2019). And there have been repeated cases where individuals (mostly gay men) have been arrested publicly shamed for their presence on online dating sites.

Section 377's repeal in the September of 2018, was the *second* time the law had been struck down. The first time it was struck down by an authority within the judicial system was nearly a decade earlier in 2009, when the Delhi High Court[42] ruled that its prohibition of "carnal intercourse against the order of nature" was unconstitutional. Unfortunately in 2013, just four years after first being struck down, the India Supreme Court reversed the High Court's ruling after a series of successful legal challenges were filed by individuals and organizations (e.g. All India Muslim Personal Law Board, Apostolic Churches Alliance and Utkal Christian Council) (Venkatesan, 2012). A key justification by the Supreme Court for their 2013 reversal was that they that believed that just "a minuscule fraction of the country's population constitutes lesbians, gays, bisexuals or transgenders" (Venkatesan, 2013).

The repeal, reversal, and final repeal of Section 377 tells a story of nation's negotiation with the normalization of homosexuality from a legal perspective. It does not fully capture the myriad forms of marginalization LGBTQ identifying individuals face (while navigating governmental bureaucracy, public spaces, family dynamics etc.) nor the intricacies of how caste, gender and class identities modulate individual experiences of queerness. That being said, constructing a rough chronology of events while paying attention to both changes in the telecommunication and media landscape as well as coverage of these changes in relation to

[42] Rulings by a High Court can be appealed and struck down by the Supreme Court.

LGBTQ issues, helps paint a picture of the ebbs and flows of a broader cultural shift regarding homosexuality taking place over the last three decades. A key observation here is that underlying the struggle for queer rights in India there is tension between a desire for sociolegal recognition of particularly middle-class LGBTQ identities as well as fears about what forms of queer intimacies will become riskier as a result of that recognition. Public conversation surrounding these issues often coalesces in public debate about developments within the media and tech industry landscape.

1980s -1990s: The HIV-AIDS crisis, dating through magazines and outrage over 'Fire'

The gay rights legalization movement in India grew in strength amidst healthcare concerns about the spread of HIV-AIDS in the late 1980s (Lakkimsetti, 2020). Following the first reported cases of HIV in India in 1986 in Chennai, the advocacy group ABVA (AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan) was formed to protest the discrimination that people with HIV were facing. ABVA's 1991 report *Less Than Gay: A Citizens' Report on the Status of Homosexuality in India* is widely regarded as the first contemporary research-based document providing specific proof of widespread discrimination against gay men in India and calling for a repeal of legislation allowing such discrimination. Three years after this report, in the Spring of 1994, there was public controversy when the Inspector General of Prisons (in Delhi) Kiran Bedi used Section 377 to justify her decision to prohibit the distribution of condoms in Tihar Jail[43]. In response to Bedi's decision ABVA filed the first written petition within the higher court system calling for the repeal of Section 377. Although the petition was quickly dismissed, its filing

[43] A maximum-security prison complex that is the largest prison complex in Asia.

marked important ground as the first time the legality of Section 377 was opposed in an Indian court setting.

While these legal developments were taking place the media landscape in India was rapidly changing. Notably there was a growing availability of magazines and personal columns for men seeking men and women seeking women during the 1990s[44]. From around 1991, MSM (Men Seeking Men) columns began to be published in magazines for gay men (e.g. *Bombay Dost* and *Khush Khat*), as well as lesbian mailing groups such as *Sakhi* (Dave, 2012). These magazines and mailing/pen pal groups they advertised remained a largely underground phenomenon however and discussions about middle-class everyday queerness remained largely absent from the public sphere.

This dynamic changed in 1996 after the release of Deepa Mehta's film *Fire*. The critically acclaimed movie, loosely based on a 1942 novel by Urdu writer Ismat Chaughati, told the story of two Hindu middle class married women (Radha and Sita) who embarked on a romantic and sexual relationship with each other. Both women were struggling with marriages in which they are sexually unfulfilled by their husbands, and slowly the two women fell in love with each other. Over the course of the movie they slowly overcame their internalized subservience towards heteronormative institutions and chose, in the end, to run away together. Although the film was celebrated by critics, it also led to weeks of riots in the streets and cinema by people protesting against the depiction of the lesbian relationship in the film citing it as immoral and against Indian values (Gopinath, 2005, pp. 131-160). In counterprotests to the

[44] See Dave (2012) for an in-depth discussion of "dating" taking place through the affordances of these magazines.

original riots, Indian queer activists used depictions of lesbian romances in precolonial India to justify the depictions of female same sex desires in *Fire*.

Interestingly, opposition to the film came from *within* the queer community as well. Following the release of the movie, the then editor of *Bombay Dost*, India's first Gay and Lesbian magazine, suggested that homosexuality was a threat to homosociality. In this article, he gives examples of how 'homosociality' among women in India, such as female-female close friendship and interaction through practices such as massage, oiling each other's hair and hugging that are accepted by Indian society if exhibitions of open sexual intimacy and commitment are not flaunted. The argument being that by bring homosexuality into the public sphere, there might be increased scrutiny of spaces for homosociality (Kishwar, 1998, p.11). This perspective while highly debatable is worth considering in the context of recent scholarship critiquing the hypersexualized environment within (particularly gay male) dating. Research on this topic is mostly based on usage of the apps in a western context and tends to frame the negative consequence of hypersexualized app environment as a reduction in *individual* users' agency to represent themselves in non-sexual ways apps (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Conner, 2019).

In the context the debate surrounding *Fire,* we see how public discussion within recent cultural memory has been about what might be lost at a collective level when sexual orientation is recognized and publicly recognizable. What has been identified as at stake is not just a loss of an individual's agency but the collective loss of spaces within which same sex intimacy can exist as sexual expression comes to the fore. Therefore, as I continue to trace the journey of Section 377 through the court system, I pay particular attention to the way in which cultural baggage associated with the struggle for queer rights seeps into industry lore in digital technology spaces.

2000s - 2010s: Activist organizing, Section 377's first repeal, communities on Social Networking Sites

In 2001, Naz, an NGO working on HIV/AIDS and sexual health related issues, filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Delhi High Court challenging the constitutionality of Section 377. It was this PIL that would culminate in the Section's (first) repeal eight years later in 2009. The journey of the PIL through the court system was long and winding. Naz's case was dismissed by the High Court in 2004, with the Court stating that since the NGO was not *directly* affected by the law, they had no right filing a PIL in the first place, even though Indian legal scholars note that a PIL can be filed by anyone. For this reason, Naz challenged the court's judgement by filing a special leave petition in front of the Supreme Court to have the case revisited[45].

Public education initiatives began to take shape in urban centers in an effort to keep up the public pressure needed to get the case recognized by courts, queer community building and For example, organizations such as *Voices Against Section 377* and *The National Campaign for Sexuality Rights* worked together to improve public outreach and bring gay rights to into mainstream public discourse (Dave, 2012). In a large part as a result of these efforts, Naz's petition was successful, and in 2006 a three judge bench at the Supreme Court ruled that the PIL should be revisited as the matter was of public interest. While Naz's PIL was making its way through the plodding bureaucracy that is the Indian court system - social media, the Internet, and

[45] See list of court documents and press releases chronicling these developments at Feminist Law Archives India (2021)

mobile phones had begun to rapidly transform the country's digital landscape and make their way into the fabric of everyday urban middle-class life.

The mid-2000s was a time when queer communities began to form on platforms online. As Internet penetration rates increased in urban centers, anonymous Yahoo chat rooms became places where young people could chat with each other and explore their sexual identity. At this time *Orkut* was the dominant Social Networking in India during the mid-2000s. Between 2008 and 2010 Facebook overtook Orkut as the most popular Social Networking Site. Writing about shifting techno-cultures surrounding the demise of Orkut in a news story for *Scroll* Bhalla (2014) writes -

> For a brief while, there was a veritable Facebook and Orkut divide. The former looked down on the latter. Moving from Orkut to Facebook was like moving up the class ladder. Those still enthusiastic about Orkut were labelled 'Orkutiyas'. The term 'Orkutiya' also became social media lingo to describe the sort of person who wanted to "make friendship" – an internet euphemism for soliciting a romantic liaison – online.

By the 2010s Facebook had emerged as the clear winner in the battle for dominance as India's preferred Social Networking platform. On the Facebook interface at the time, the then new "group" feature became home to social collectives for gay and lesbian Indians such as the *Gay and Lesbian Vaishnava Association* (GALVA), *Pink News*, and *Queer Campus*[46] that remain popular even in 2020. These groups were digital spaces where new queer intimate possibilities could take shape but were also spaces where queer bodies were made visibly and put under risk.

[46] GALVA is a group for Gay and Lesbians from the Vaishanva Hindu community. Pink News is a group for lesbian women, Queer Campus is a group for Indians who identify as queer and are part of University colleges.

Importantly even the repeal of Section 377 in 2009 did not erase the dangerous ways in which legalized queer intimacies were policed. For instance, between 2009 and 2013, even as Section 377 remained struck down by the Delhi High Court, there were several high-profile incidents where public shaming and institutional harassment of gay men made national headlines because of these men's presence on dating sites. For example, in 2010, a local television channel (TV9) in Hyderabad aired a seven-minute segment called *Gay Culture Rampant In Hyderabad*. This segment consisted of a "sting operation" where the television channel found details of users of Planet Romeo and publicly outed them by divulging their photos, phone conversations, and chats. Although homosexuality was legal when the TV9 sting took place, the public shaming and institutional harassment (by media systems) had a profound impact on the lives of the men targeted (Dasgupta, 2018; Khubchandani, 2019). This example is evidence of the many ways in which scrutiny and surveillance of queer bodies gets intertwined with being on a dating app. The events of the TV9 operation resembles the Lucknow park raid by police faking profiles on Planet Romeo that had taken place eight years prior (discussed earlier in the chapter). It is also a reminder of the limits of a legal repeal of Section 377 without a broader cultural shift in values towards queer bodies.

Impact on dating app industry lore

Taking a closer look at advertising initiatives and financial investment within India's dating app landscape during the 2010s, it is clear that there is a stark difference in the amount of corporate activity surrounding heterosexual dating platforms as compared to gay male dating platforms. In the seven years between 2011 and 2018, the number users on international gay

dating sites in India (e.g. Scruff, PlanetRomeo, Grindr) grew steadily[47]. Thus, this difference in corporate energy was not a consequence of how popular apps were among users. Yet, these gay male dating platforms did little to advertise or set up offices in the country, and no regional startups attempted to enter into this space until Delta.[48]

The lack of attention and investment is notable when contrasted with the changes taking place in the heterosexual dating app landscape, where there was a proliferation of global and local companies all claiming to provide the unique services to meet the romantic, sexual, and connective needs of heterosexual Indians. A potential explanation for this discrepancy is that the struggle for queer rights and recognition during the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s in India influenced corporate lore within the dating app space regarding the risks of directly hailing the queer community. I do not mean to suggest that this was the *sole* driver for the difference noted above, but rather a dynamic that worked in tandem with broader company level policies and directives (For instance Grindr internationally tended to approach all its non-western markets through initiatives led by its Corporate Social Responsibility initiative - *Grindr for Equality*)[49].

During interviews in the summer of 2016, several early-stage Venture Capital funders and upper management within established heterosexual dating apps working in the region voiced their interest in entering the LGBTQ dating space ("We have looked at LGBT dating also, just

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[47] While specific data about user numbers is not available Dasgupta (2017) in his book on *Digital Queer Cultures* in India discusses the growing use of dating platforms among gay men. This trend was verified further during in-depth conversations with people working within the LGBTQ civil society space.

[48] Companies like Tinder remained friendly towards the queer community but did not actively advertise to this sexual demographic. Also important here that operating as a dating app company was completely legal.

[49] See Grinder for Equaluty (2021) for a detailed mission statement from Grindr as well as a list of resources and support information.

did three focus groups recently. It's an interesting space, much needed"). However, they resisted making actual financial investments to do this, citing concerns about the social ramification for them by associating themselves directly with LGBTQ politics ("We just want to be careful with that"). While most often these ramifications were left vague, at times past events were referenced as evidence for their belief that operating as an app associated with the queer community could be dangerous. For example, at an LGBTQ art exhibit opening I attended in February 2018, the "Bharosa incident" was brought up in anxious tones as evidence for the continued need for Delta to "be careful" about expanding.

The "Bharosa incident" had occurred nearly a decade before, when police raided a park commonly known to be a cruising site for hijra, kothi[50] and gay men in the Lucknow, a mid-sized city in north India (Rajalakshmi, 2001). The raid was prompted by a complaint from a man who called the police station saying he had been "sodomized" by an unknown individual at the park. Ten people were arrested in the police's raid of the park, among them was an activist from the Bharosa Trust (an NGO working on HIV/AIDS awareness among the Men Seeking Men community). The police then decided to raid the offices of the Bharosa Trust and Naz Foundation, another NGO associated with the queer rights movement. Breaking into these two offices, the police beat and arrested four people working there, as well as seizing outreach materials (e.g. condoms, lubricants, instructional videos, and dildos) used as part of safe sex education initiatives (Dave, 2012).

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[50] Hijra is a term to refer to transwomen living in intentional queer communities in South Asia. Other terms used to refer to this community include Aravani, Aruvani or Jagappa. In India the community is recognized as "third gender" by the government – though the implications of this recognition have been criticized as carceral as a result of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019. Kothi is a term that refers to biological males who are effeminate and prefer taking a feminine role in a same sex relationship. Some hijras can identify as kothi. See Mount (2020) for a detailed discussion of these dynamics in contemporary India.

Widespread national media coverage of the “Bharosa Incident” framed the NGOs involved as “sex clubs” polluting Lucknow. Headlines included "Gay Club Supplied Boys to Politicians," "Gay Culture Started In UP In 1998," "Lucknow Police Raid Gay Clubs, Ten Arrested," and "Call Boy Racket Sends Shock Waves in Lucknow." (Narrain, 2004). Summarizing an analysis of the media coverage surrounding the Bharosa Incident, Dave (2012, p.176) writes “To peruse the media reports from the next several days is to remember just how dense a node homosexuality is for contests over class, culture and nation”. She also notes that coverage was fixated on the seeming modernity of Bharosa and NFI offices, with reporters writing about the middle class modern appliances they held (e.g. refrigerators and microwaves) as conclusive indicators of wealth, privilege and cosmopolitanism that were being used to lure young boys and “corrupt them” into being “deviant.” Moreover, the fact that both Naz and Bharosa had received funding from international sources became the cornerstone of a media conspiracy theory where the NGO activists were believed to be part of a Pakistani government funded scheme to halt India’s development by turning its men gay. These views gained legitimacy when Lucknow's Senior Superintendent of Police, who was involved in the case, publicly claimed Naz and Bharosa, were running “gay clubs” (Narrain, 2004, p. 153).

While it can be tempting to dismiss narratives of events like the Bharosa incident as isolated cases or examples of a bygone era, they continue to exert an influence on contemporary digital production cultures. They seep into industry lore and circulate through subtle references made by people working in the space. More often than not, the names and dates of these incidents have faded away. Yet, there is a strong sense that associating one's dating product with the LGBTQ community is a clear invitation for unnecessary risk. Drawing on Rao’s (2020, p.31) question of “how the afterlives of British colonialism shapes the queer politics of its colonies in

the present", I observe that the history of state scrutiny towards civil society organizations associated with queer bodies, can influence decision makers within the corporate dating app sphere.

Yet, it is worth remembering that there are distinct differences between how the Indian state has approached civil society versus the for-profit tech industry. A clear example of this is the difference between the Indian government's approach to risks "international funding" pose towards civil society versus the digital technology industry. In 2016, the year I began fieldwork, twenty-five NGOs with international funding lost their operating licenses based on undisclosed government "field reports" that said they were conducting anti-national activities. Meanwhile, the national government actively supported international investment in India's for-profit digital technology industry, proudly celebrating international backing as an indication of both an individual tech company's global market power and the success of the government's "Digital India" campaign. (McKinsey Global Institute, 2019). Thus even as the fear of state sanctioned persecution for being involved in LGBTQ community issues persists, the state led turn towards the "digital" means that app producers working on queer dating apps are perhaps unlikely to face the kind pushback civil society organizations and activists' encounter.

Early in the summer of 2018, Delta became the first app to take on some of the perceived risks of operating as a dating app in India openly inviting queer users to enter it. Following the momentous ruling on 6th September 2018 decriminalizing homosexuality, the dating app ecosystem underwent rapid shifts. When I arrived back in India in November 2018, just two months after the ruling, the impact of the Supreme Court decision had already trickled down to affect the concrete business strategies of dating app companies. For instance, leading Chinese gay male dating/social app Blued had set up a regional headquarter in Noida Delhi, Tinder

launched a new in-app feature giving its Indian users twenty-three different gender/sexual identity options to choose from on the app, and popular gay male dating platforms Planet Romeo and Grindr began actively advertising at Gay Pride events taking place across metropolitan centers.

Messy Desires, Clean Design: Introducing Delta

Delta was incubated by TrulyMadly (whose production cultures were the focus of the last chapter). As of Fall 2018, Delta's interface had a tripartite structure. When users signed onto the platform, they were offered three distinctive sub-services – Connect (traditional online dating), Network (a list of queer friendly spaces), and Community (a social forum to discuss shared interests). The name Delta was chosen by its founder as a way to allude to the Greek symbol delta (Δδ) that is used to signify difference and change in mathematics. According to the app's executives its difference was that it was "homegrown" and committed to addressing the romantic needs of individuals across the LGBTQIA+ spectrum.

The language of "being homegrown" used by Delta has historically been associated with a fight for freedom from foreign rule. As part of the struggle for Indian independence during the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Swadeshi (loosely translated as 'homegrown') movement called for increased domestic production infrastructures and a boycott of British made goods to put economic pressure on the British to encourage them to leave. In contrast to the colonial roots of the Swadeshi movement to get *rid* of foreign influence, investment and power, the use of the phrase "being homegrown" has recently become increasingly associated with the marketing of localism as a way to remain relevant in a global world (Mazzarella, 2003; Bhaskaran, 2004). We see this at Delta where its localism as a homegrown app produced by Indians is used to try and

acquire large international investment. For instance, Ishaan Sethi describes one of his initial conversations with Sachin Bhatia of TrulyMadly –

> 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.

The quote above captures some of the skills perceived as positive assets for leading a dating app startup as – knowledge of products and technologies, familiarity with business logics, understanding startup funding structures, youthfulness, and an ability to be relatable to both 'western' and 'Indian' audiences. 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."

The answer to *why* Delta ended up becoming an app for the "queer" community as a whole as opposed to targeting a specific identity category within the umbrella can in part be attributed to the freedom afforded to it during its incubation. This is not a complete explanation of why, but one likely significant factor that created the environment that allowed an app like Delta to exist. During the process of market research investigating the feasibility of the app, Ishaan was guaranteed time, space, and resources by TrulyMadly. This included access to backend technical infrastructure (e.g. 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 for dating apps in India that year (following a spike in 2014-2016). This relative freedom allowed Ishaan to take several months and conduct in-depth market research

(e.g. focus groups with LGBTQ identifying individuals, working with established NGOs). As a result of this research, he decided that issues of marginalization and persecution shared by members across India's queer community made a dating app targeting the entire LGBTQ spectrum a viable product. I was told -

> Of course all of this was happening pre-377. This was May to August 2017. So it was research, focus groups with different hypothesis. Validating them, invalidating them. It was just me, that was when I was working with Truly Madly as a consultant on the idea of Delta. We had surveys, focus groups across the country, worked with existing organizations Humsafar Trust, HIV Aids alliance, foundations working with the trans community. Understanding whether there are segmented differences within the community as far as an app is concerned. Can an app cater to everyone? Because thus far a majority of apps are gay male hook-up apps. And then lesbian apps are seen as these oh my god deep meaningful, put a ring on it on your first date, you know sort of environment. And after speaking to everyone we were like okay there are a bunch of problems say, seventy percent of the problems that are faced by the entire community. Problems around safety, around security, profile verification, you know STDs, prostitution checks, things like that. So that is how we started building the app.

However, materializing this vision of intimate possibility within the digital infrastructure of a dating app meant Delta facing several design challenges.

In *Sorting Things Out*, Bowker & Star (1999: 4) write "Information scientists work every day on the design, delegation and choice of classification systems and standards, yet few see them as artifacts embodying moral and aesthetic choices that in turn craft people's identities, aspirations and dignity." To some degree, I observed this in my conversations with community

managers and developers at Delta, who as part of their daily jobs treated download numbers and user preferences as abstract concepts that needed to be "managed" to reach whatever target goals had been set for them that week. But perhaps more interestingly, upper-level management at Delta and particularly its founder Ishaan thought very carefully about the implications of their management decisions, often critiquing other dating platforms for simply "using LGBTQ identities as marketing buzzwords" rather than actually trying to engage with the subtleties of queer experiences. Reflecting on my conversations with people across the Delta team, I was struck by their often eloquently vocalized frustration toward outwardly "progressive moves" and continued commitment to trying to design a platform that *valued* the stated sexual preferences of its users, despite the many difficulties this posed.

My first interview with Ishaan took place a few weeks after Tinder had launched its latest in-app feature (twenty-three gender identity options). The launch of this feature in India was the first time the availability of multiple gender options was offered to users in a non-European market. However, functionally. Tinder continued to operate using the same gender based binary logic to match its users (matching based on whether you were male or female, and whether you wanted to be matched with someone who was male or female). Sitting in a conference room speaking to him about what Delta was trying to do in the Indian market, our conversation touched on the topic of Tinder's new identity options and Ishaan remarked, slightly annoyed - "I mean no one is talking about how the matching is still the same, I mean we are the ones trying to actually provide diversity in matching and that is just so much [more] difficult." What Ishaan is highlighting here is the difference between a design decision to provide a place on a dating app for users to state their specific sexual orientation/identity and an app's algorithmic infrastructure valuing that information. The latter being far more difficult to successfully accomplish because it is difficult to

offer people multiple categories to choose from and also match people based on their preferences - unless there is a sizable number of people within each category group.

Thus, even with the twenty-three new gender identity categories people could now use to represent themselves, Tinder still operated using the same gender binary dependent logic to match its users (matching based on whether a person was male/female, and whether they desired someone who was male/female). Thus, the illusion of control afforded to the user and heavily advertised as a progressive move did little to change the technological systems that continued to classify and categorize based on established gender dichotomies.

A software developer at the company gave a summary of the varied contradictory pressures involved with creating a platform where a person's sexual orientation and specific partner preferences were considered in the matching process. He explained-

> 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 be just two people with the same preferences.

The quote above shows some of the intersecting issues that the Delta team grapple with as part of their daily routine at work. First, there is the design challenge involved in creating both a functioning algorithm and a navigable app interface that can effectively match people based on their specific sexual and gender orientation. Related to this is the pedagogical challenge of needing to educate users about what different terms used to signify gender and sexual orientations mean. For instance, Delta tried to be more gender inclusive by giving users the option of choosing "non-binary" as one of their gender identities. They also included options for users to identify as "trans male", or "trans female". However, in focus groups Delta found that

users tended to click on options without knowing what they meant. They found that a lot of their users were confused by the terminology provided on the app and simply picked one of the options on the screen at random. The lack of commonsense cultural understanding of terms like "trans male", "trans female" and "non-binary" also raises a larger question about whether the app was enforcing a vocabulary of diversity that did not map onto its user base's understanding of the world.

To try and address confusion among users, the management team asked their UX designers to include a short description of what each identity category meant. However, this was a challenge for the UX design team who struggled to incorporate these descriptions without cluttering up the screen. The clean minimal design with intuitive navigability that the app was trying to achieve, left little room for designers to include nuanced explanations about non-binary gender identity and terminology for sexual orientations. This one example captures some of the difficulty in designing a dating app for a multiplicity of non-cis/heteronormative sexual orientations.

Ensuring Safety, Measuring Authenticity

While sitting in on one of Delta's internal "project update session" in 2018, the topic of discussion shifted to a couple of minor technical server issues, and a team lead commented "Come on guys, this is priority one, we need to solve this immediately. User safety is our number one, who is working on this?" Issues surrounding how to ensure user safety, I was told, were regularly brought up in office meetings like the one I was in. Safety was at the foundation of Delta's digital product - the app's description on Google Play and Apple store began with the line "Delta is the safest way to meet like-minded people from the LGBTQ community" and

newspapers and magazines coverage about the app nearly always included a quote from Ishaan about how Delta provided "safe and secure dating."

There are a couple of possible reasons undergirding Delta's emphasis on safety as a core feature of its platform. First, there are the many real risks of violence and public shaming that queer folk are subject to when their online selves get 'leaked' to the public (this has been discussed in detail in the previous section on queer rights). Then, there is the fact that Delta's incubator TrulyMadly emphasizes safety might have seeped into Delta's vision during the app's early development. Additionally, Delta's emphasis on safety appears to be rooted in its founder Ishaan's personal experience with dating as a gay man in India. It is this last point that I examine further, as a way to consider how the embodied experiences of an app's founder can impact product features.

Ishaan Sethi, spoke candidly about the struggles he faced growing up desiring other men in India but having to pretend to be straight to avoid being ridiculed in high school. He explained that he only came to terms with his sexual orientation when he left Delhi to attend Brown University and discovered a whole new world of queer culture[51]. After graduating from college and working for a brief stint in New York, Ishaan moved back to India in 2014. A combination of better job prospects and family obligations brought him back home to Delhi. It was at this time that he first began to think about the possibility of creating a dating app specifically for gay Indians-

[51] I mention this personal story here, not just because Ishaan Sethi is a public figure but also because he recounted this story for public consumption in media interviews such as *Keeping It Queer* in S02 Ep 23.

> It was when I moved back here that shit hit the fan. Because my worry was going back into the closet. I refused to do that. That was the time I realized I have no gay friends. And that was the time this whole thing in my head started. Like what do I do. I am not an advocacy person, not a policy person, not a non-profit person…

Unable to imagine a role for himself within already established institutions (e.g. advocacy, policy, civil society) dealing with queer issues, Ishaan started thinking about opportunities that the digital sector held. He elaborated further saying – "The idea for Delta came from very intense personal frustrations about being here [India] as a gay man and the problems that I have faced". His early vision for an "Indian" dating app came from a desire to provide an alternative to the highly sexualized app environment popular in "western" gay male dating apps like Grindr, Scruff and Planet Romeo.

For Ishaan, the hypersexual digital cruising culture encouraged by the design and advertising of "Grindr and other such apps" was not suited for India because he believed that this environment significantly exacerbated risks of being gay and looking for sexual encounters in public spaces. His perspective was informed by his personal experiences using such apps in the country -

> 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.

Versions of the quote above were included as a part of magazine coverage, video interviews and podcasts about Delta. In this way, Ishaan's personal story gets embedded in the idea of Delta. By emphasizing safety and community over sexuality, Delta tries to set itself apart from its competitors and offer a digital space celebrating non-sexual performances of queer identity. Key here is the way in which the fear for his bodily safety, inspired the need for safety checks within the app he founded. Of course, one can (and should) be wary of taking a founder's narrative of their company's origins at face value. But it is nonetheless important to recognize that it is the embodied knowledge of an individual that becomes part of what makes Delta "queer" and "Indian". In other words, part of what makes Delta queer and Indian is simply that it was 'founded' and managed by someone who claimed those markers of identity[52].

Identifying Authenticity

It was not all users of the app that needed to be kept safe and protected. Rather those users considered to be "genuine" and "authentic" by Delta needed to be kept safe from those judged as disingenuous by the app. I was told that the goal of this approach to verifying authenticity was to "create a self-trusting environment" where people were "rewarded" for creating more trustworthy profiles. Within this system 'inauthenticity' was equated with risk and threat. A person's level of authenticity was determined by the app based on the degree of the information about themselves they disclosed to Delta. Authenticity was judged at two levels –

[52] Additionally dimensions of Ishaan's individual experience (being upper middle class, familiar with western gay cultural norms, fears around family responsibilities) become subtly tied to discourses about who the app is for and what one should be looking for in the app.

whether a person was ‘really human’ and less directly whether they were ‘really queer’. At the first level, Delta at a platform system level classified a person as really human (and not a bot). At the second level, Delta made judgements about whether a person was ‘authentically queer’. The app made these classifications based on a series of ‘verification information’ elicited from users when they signed up to the app and culminated in each user being given a “Trust Score”. The Trust Score was a numeric descriptor representing how ‘trustworthy’ the app thought a person was. This score was publicly visible on their profile on the app.

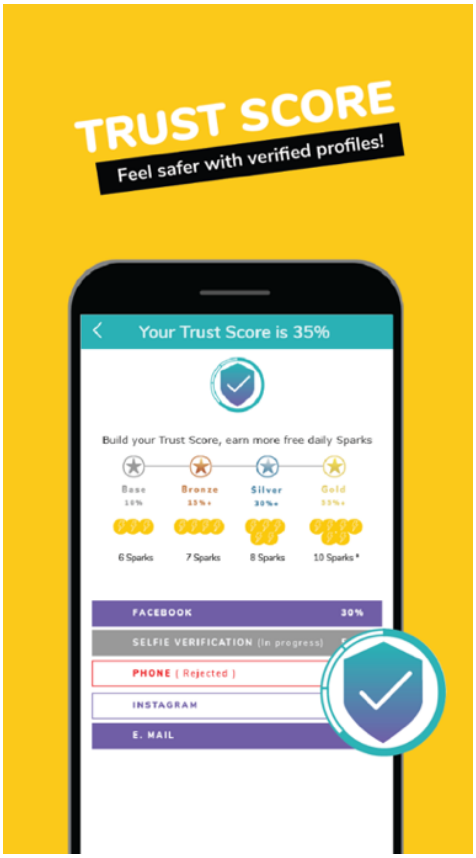

Figure 15 - Summary of Delta’s Trust Score incentivizing users to earn more “Sparks” to achieve Gold Tier status

The public visibility of Trust Scores mediated potential interactions between users by acting as indicators of authenticity. Trust Scores also acted as enclosures that bound the kinds of interactions a user could have with the platform; individuals with higher trust scores were treated

as safer by Delta and therefore received access to better in-app features such as more in-app credit (called Sparks) and better matches.

A dictionary definition of the word "trust" describes the noun as a "firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone or something" (Merriam-Webster, n.d). Lewis & Weigert (1985) notes that the dynamic of trust between machine technologies and their users often depends on users anthropomorphizing these technologies. At Delta, we see how the reverse also holds true. Delta's trust score depends on non-human actors (the digital and algorithmic infrastructure of the app) effectively categorizing and classifying an individual user's self-presentation of queerness.

I spoke with people at Delta about the categorization and classification processes to get a sense of how Trust Scores worked. The specific algorithms and operation systems of course remain proprietary company information, however a general outline of the process was something they were willing to share. It turns out the verification process was adopted largely from the verification criteria used by TrulyMadly. The only exception was "Selfie verification" which had been inspired by Bumble's authentication process and was also the only Trust Score criteria where moderation was primarily done by a human (i.e. the companies moderation team). Each criterion making up the Trust Score carried a different weight. Email addresses were weighted the least (5%). Selfies were weighted the most (50%). Below is a breakdown of all the criteria. This information can be found within the app.

Table 1 - 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

At Delta, the process of receiving a Trust Score was both transparent and opaque to users. The different criteria used to determine Trust Scores (Facebook account, Mobile number, Instagram account, Email address and in-app selfie) were presented within the app in a grid like table that reminded users about additional information they needed to provide to reach complete or "gold status" verification. Users were continually incentivized to provide more information about themselves through repeated reminders on the platform of how close they were to reaching their trust score goal.

Thus, Trust Scores were gamified by making the tiered status of in-app matching features dependent on the system's perception of "trust" in a user. To do this, the platform had to be "transparent" about the criteria users were required to meet. Yet, why these criteria were chosen and how the information provided would be judged as authentic remained opaque. For example, users did not get information as to why a Facebook account was weighed so much more than an Instagram account despite both being Social Media accounts. Similarly, it was unclear how their

information would be vetted by the app. What we see here is the boundary of enclosures within an app being moderated through incentives to reveal data, while the question of how the data is being utilized remain elusive.

Within Delta's platform, Trust Scores structure a user's in-app experience. While there appears to be a commonsense understanding among users that Trust Scores are highly fluid indicators, the technological infrastructure of Delta's platform interprets these scores as absolute values. For several users of Delta, the Trust Scores of people they matched with were perceived as loose signifiers of authenticity. The four users I spoke to about this feature on Delta all pointed out that for them, Trust Score's only mattered if they found elements of the profile already suspicious. For instance, if a person was unusually attractive, or had a "photo that looked like a stock photo" Delta users said that paid attention to the Trust Score on the profile to help them determine if they wanted to match. Thus, for users, Delta's Trust Scores were not absolute values of authenticity but rather fluid indicators of the validity of their own internal judgments.

Moderating Selfie-hood

"Selfies" were the single largest contributor to a Delta user's Trust Score (weighted at 50%). To achieve the highest verification tier (gold), that carried with it significant in-app rewards, users were required to take a 'selfie' of themselves with the in-app camera. At Delta, (after an automated facial recognition scan) selfies were 'verified' manually by a small moderation team. The team looked through selfies users submitted to ensure that the image was of a "real person. They judged this by seeing if the selfie they submitted matched other photos on the social media accounts (e.g. Facebook) they linked with their profiles. In a cover story of the

company by an Indian online LGBTQ magazine (FSoG, 2018), the marketing manager at Delta described the unusual impact of the moderation process on her daily routine at work saying –

> Yes, it means I start my day with at least thirty 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.

Her daily office routine emphasizes how moderating selfies involves a very intimate kind of manual labor. She gives the example of cis-men pretending to be trans-women "just to exist on the app" as an extreme example of the type of inauthenticity Delta wants to discourage. Her response captures the kind of "break in trust" and "inauthenticity" Delta is trying to protect its users from. Cis-men claiming to be trans to join "new dating app" Delta and match with women appeared to be a significant problem faced. The marketing managers morning routine of sifting through "dick pics" and carefully scrutinizing profiles for markers of genuine queerness was interpreted by the company as something that was necessary to allow the broader user base on the platform to "be themselves" without the worry that others on the app were not being real.

Variations of the manager's routine were echoed in my one-on-one discussions with the small handful of people who had moderated selfies for Delta and I quickly learnt that the main issue all of them faced were straight men pretending to be 'queer' (so that they could meet women on the platform). Overall, there is a high male to female ratio across all dating apps operating in India, with industry estimates ranging from seven men for every three women to nine men for every woman (K. Singh, 2018). However, for most other dating apps an overrepresentation of men 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[sexual] 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 desires.

To deal with this problem, selfie moderators paid attention to profiles of male users that had no visually defining femme features and whose profile that listed that they were "interested in women" or whenever a profile was flagged as inappropriate by another user. Although the team did not directly discriminate against specific users, they did indirectly pay attention to what "authentic" profiles looked like. Situating discussions about surveillance within the specificities of queer identity categories in the region - 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 (e.g. Hijra, Kothi, Arvani, Kinnar). The English word queer was adopted by Indian activists in the 1990s 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 (Narrain, 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 true members of the LGBTQ community) runs into contradictions - 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 from users on the platform. By placing itself as an app for the "queer" community as

opposed to gay men or lesbian women - the app attempts to be inclusive of various sexual orientations. Yet at the same time trust building safety systems demands authenticity from users where one's online portrayal has to match one's real self.

The categorization of personhood required to make Delta's Trust Score distills the multiplicity queerness down to essential categories (binary, non-binary, lesbian, trans, cis, heterosexual, asexual) and whether or not they fit into prevalent expectations of what people occupying those identities should look like. What gets lost in the process is what is most unique about queer sexuality - its fluidity and resistance to being bound by classificatory systems. Giffney & O'Rourke (2016, p. 8) describe the "drawing together" power of queerness as an ability to hold uncertainty by encouraging the experience of states without necessarily trying to dissect, understand or categories them. Edelman (2004, p. 17) writes about how queerness is characterized by a resistance to the clean boxes in which complex identities are put into, writing "queerness can never define an identity; it can only disturb one". Like Bhandari & Kovacs (2021) I too observe that that even as Delta tries to make queer desires legible and transparent the spaces for malleable boundary management disappear.

Commoditizing Queerness Post-377

"Two cappuccino's ma'am?" the cashier at a 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 to a table at the corner of the room. The sun-kissed walls boasted hanging leafy plants, everyone looked under the age of forty, and there was a generous smattering of (white) expats. As I slid onto my

seat, I was struck by the similarity of the cafe's aesthetic and clientele to a hipster coffee shop back in Ann Arbor and Detroit.

Sitting across from me, on a mid-century modern style wooden chair, was the marketing manager at Delta introduced earlier. We were here to talk through potential ideas she had for Delta's first video ad campaign five months after the striking down of Section 377. She began by explaining where she felt the company was facing difficulty, saying: "We are just stuck at the communication bit. So, a couple of ideas…So we can't get our finger on it…Should we go with a hard-hitting sort of a video?"

Between sips of coffee, she elaborated that the company was playing around with four different concepts for their first advertisement. The four versions shared several similarities - they were all short videos (between two to four minutes), they featured Indians who occupied different orientations on the LGBTQIA spectrum, the people featured were interested in finding a romantic connection and each video ended with the same tagline. What was different between the four video concepts was the degree to which difficulties of being queer in India were addressed. That is, the focus of the advertisements ranged from emphasizing celebrating the success of the repeal to centering the continued struggle involved in living life as an individual with LGBTQ desires in the country. The latter was what the manager referred to as a "hard hitting sort of video".

Thus, what varied between the three videos was the way in which Delta was presented. In three of them, the app was presented as a tool to express queer desire at an individual level (find a partner, meet new people, date). In one, the app was characterized as a tool to mobilize queer resistance, at a societal level (building community, recognizing collective difficulties). While people at Delta suspected that a more positive, celebratory presentation of LGBTQ dating online

would work better for their app sales in the light of the general public positive sentiment, following the repeal of Section 377, the manager I was speaking to had her reservations about this approach -

> I am tired of the rosiness. As a queer woman I am tired of it. My friend has known she is a lesbian for fifteen 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. Abhi bhi [till now]. 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 importance 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 is at least a partial consequence of how users are imagined by investors. As we brainstormed the pros and cons for each ad, the manger explained the end goal of Delta's ads, saying -

> 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 at getting us downloads for sure

Download Numbers, Daily Active Users (DAUs) and Monthly Active Users (MAUs) are common metrics used by investment bodies to judge app success. These metrics alongside indicators such as Customer Acquisition Costs (CACs) and Churn Rate form a portfolio of Key

Performance Indicators (KPIs) that are used to secure and maintain investor funding across app startups broadly. Reaching target KPIs is required for dating app startups to move up the chain of investor funding from Angel investments to the final Series C stage.

KPIs are particularly valued by investors because of their presumed objectivity. A 2017 TechCrunch article describes the indicators saying "KPIs, if constructed correctly, give management and potential investors a cold, analytical snapshot of the state of the company, untainted by emotion or rhetoric" (Nadel, 2017). When commoditizing something that has been a fraught and deeply personal rights-based issue (freedom to legally and socially express LGBTQ desires) the standard measurements of app "success" runs the risk of failing to account for the weight of marginalization and resistance associated with being queer. 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 consider the intricacies of regional experience.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored how (Indian) queerness as a particular form of intimate possibility gets negotiated by dating and ancillary app industry actors at a moment of socio-legal disjuncture in the country (the repeal of Section 377). Focusing on some of the ways in which state institutions (e.g. police, judiciary), civil society (e.g. NGOs such as Naz and Bharosa) and tech/media industries (magazine personals, *Fire*, dating apps) have rubbed up against each other to delineate the normative boundaries of queer Indian intimacies - I highlight how the afterlives of colonial era legal directives get enmeshed with contemporary state and cultural imperatives.

Paying attention to the dynamics of this enmeshing is important, I argue, because it helps us understand how queer bodies, Indian desires, and the riskiness of getting involved with them as an organization slip into corporate tech industry lore and subtly inform the shape of new digital dating app enclosures can take. Focusing on one such app - the startup Delta - I examine the intricacies and contradictions of how it manages being a "homegrown" app for the entire LGBTQIA+ community. Wanting to do more than just offer queer people an opportunity to *state* their identity in the app, the platform designers struggled with how to keep the app's interface clean and minimal when users randomly click on gender/sexual preference identity descriptors.

Through a discussion on these practices, I show how ordinary office work in dating app companies involves encounters with the vividly intimate (such as sifting through dick pics in the morning). It is inserting these kinds of manual labor practices into digital technology production that humanizes the tech space that is often painted as a world of algorithms. Centering the bodies of people building these technologies reveals how personal experiences of vulnerability (in the case of Ishaan for example) cement the importance of the need for "safety" at Delta. Coming back to the lingering effects of discourses around 377 towards the end of the chapter, I revisit how Delta negotiates between trying to market their platform to make the most of the "rosiness" surrounding queer communication following the repeal, to try and get the download numbers demanded by investors - while at the same time recognizing the many struggles that queer individuals in the country continue to face. It is this incommensurability of queerness as a form of intimate possibility and the pragmatic pressures of working as a dating app startup that is the underlying dynamic analyzed in Delta's safety verification and selfie moderation practices.

As the case of Delta shows, creating an app that can hold the messiness of queer desires and the lived realities of queer marginalization is tough. Much like TrulyMadly and Tinder in the

earlier chapter - the digital platform of Delta is imagined by its producers as a kind of enclosure trying to protect queer users within it, but in trying to do so encounter resistance (both intentional and unintentional) from people whose modes of desiring repel the continuous boundary-making demanded by app functionalities. It is the consequence of users randomly clicking on the many gender and sexual orientation options the app offers, or cis-men joining the app claiming to be queer just to meet women, that gets understood by those involved in producing Delta as problematic affects. In this way the porous boundaries queer intimacy resists the digital enclosures needed to make the forms and functionalities of dating apps work.

I want to be careful here, as I have tried to be throughout the dissertation, to not minimize or delegitimize the significant risks queer people face. More security on digital platforms is often desired by both women and LGBTQ identifying individuals in India. But people are able to simultaneously hold an alternate desire of wanting to play, blur and skirt around defining our desires. It is being able to design digital systems that can function while holding space for these dual modes of desiring (i.e. wanting recognition and resisting recognition of one's desires) that is the heart of the struggle for a queer dating app like Delta.

One thing that struck me while looking at the beginning of Delta's launch was its "Network" feature which provided a regularly updated list of queer friendly spaces. While the emphasis on this affordance of the app reduced as the platform focused more on the "dating" component - it reminded me of how being able to gain access to physical spaces to "go on" dates was something that was difficult and important in India. Therefore in the next chapter I examine how built environments in cities and the need for finding 'private spaces' to be intimate informed the development of "love hotel aggregation" apps that help mediate access to physical enclosures to be intimate.

Chapter 4
Materializing Physical Enclosures Through StayUncle

The opening scene of *Masaan*, a critically acclaimed Bollywood film released in 2015, shows the female protagonist of the movie (Devi) checking into a hotel in the city of Varanasi with her boyfriend (Piyush). While Piyush deals with the check-in process at a seedy looking hotel front desk, Devi (a trainer at a computer coaching center) stands meekly to the side. She is dressed in a *sari*[53] to give her the appearance of already being married. After successfully checking in, Piyush and Devi enter their hotel room and begin having sex. They are abruptly interrupted by a group of policemen who break into their room and immediately start harassing the couple. The policemen had been tipped off by hotel staff who suspected that Devi and Piyush were indulging in "indecent behavior", which is code for premarital sex. Once in the room, the lead police inspector (Mishra) starts recording Devi who is lying half naked on the bed desperately trying to hide under the covers. While this is taking place, her boyfriend, Piyush runs into the bathroom and commits suicide by slitting his wrists. The powerful opening scene of the film captures the cultural stigma associated with premarital sex, particularly in small towns and is a dramatic example of the risks that can come with checking into a hotel as an unmarried couple in India.

[53] A South Asian garment. Traditionally, once married, Hindu women are supposed to always wear saris/

Figure 16 - In the opening sequence of Masaan, police inspector (Mishra) records Devi on his smartphone as a way to threaten, shame, and later blackmail her.

Couple friendly hotel aggregation platforms are a relatively new kind of digital service, one that deal in the business of helping people find safe places to have sex and be intimate with each other. Indian media coverage of 'couple-friendly' hotel aggregation services present the platforms[54] as digital solutions to the "worst-case" scenario depicted in *Masaan*. In 2015, StayUncle pivoted from its earlier avatar as a booking portal for transit travelers looking for a room while waiting for their train to become India's first couple friendly hotel aggregation app. In the same year, OYO, a pan-India hospitality chain introduced a "couple filter" on their app and website to help unmarried users weed through their expansive list of properties and find ones that would accept them. A year later, in 2016, LuvStay entered the competition, working in a similar format to StayUncle but focusing more on budget hotels. By 2017, multiple online hotel booking platforms (e.g. AwesomeStays, FabHotels, ZO Rooms and Tripvillas) had all introduced "couple friendly" search criteria into their broader choice of filters.

[54] I use the word platform and app interchangeably because the initial version of StayUncle was desktop/browser based but then became available as a mobile app (for both android and iOS).

Journalists termed platforms like StayUncle and LuvStay as “love apps” and all the couple friendly hotels listed as “love hotels”. In stories like “Lust in translation: arrival of the 'love hotel' divides India” (Safi, 2018) and “Indian ‘love apps’ give couples greater freedom” (Kannampilly, 2020) journalists wrote about how the arrival of this “new kind” of online booking service was desperately needed by young urban Indians who struggle to find safe places to be intimate as dating app use skyrocketed across the country and premarital sex became more normalized within their generation (Majumdar, 2018; Jha, 2019). Taking a closer look at one particular ‘love app’, StayUncle, I argue that digital platforms work to enclose places for intimacy in India. In other words, this chapter explores the relationship between digital affordances and enclosures for physical contact. Building on this, I examine how physical places are materialized through the aggregation practices of an app like StayUncle. As a result of how these spaces are aggregated by the app, I observe how a room is made a “love” room by virtue of how the digital platform signaled that within *that* space one would be safe from the dangers of being intimate in public (e.g. policing, surveillance) while also having their relationship recognized and accepted without judgement.

Even though StayUncle is clearly not a dating app, I present it as an important ancillary industry within the dating app ecosystem as it provides functionalities that mediate encounters of physical bodies after virtual contact. The norm of living with one's family until marriage, stigma associated with public displays of affection (with the opposite sex) and the risk of moral policing from vigilante groups in public spaces, often makes it difficult for people meeting over a dating app to then access a physical space to continue their romance in India. The advent of hotel aggregation apps is predicated specifically on utilizing affordances of digitality (e.g. scale of database aggregation, search filters, real time results) to create new potential for intimate

physical encounters. Taking an in-depth look at the origin story and production practices of StayUncle, the first love hotel aggregation app that began operating in this space in India, I suggest that the possibilities of intimacy that dating apps promise is dependent on the existence of ancillary app infrastructures, like love hotel aggregators. Despite *love hotel aggregation apps*, thus far, never directly partnering with *dating apps*, I suggest that it is worth considering the genres of platforms as mutually supportive and part existing within the same digital ecosystem. If dating apps facilitate people connecting with each other *online*, love hotel aggregators directly deal with the next phase of the dating process, that is the issue of where one might meet with a romantic or sexual partner(s) in person. In other words, platforms like StayUncle deal in the business of managing the *physical logistics* of intimacy.

As detailed in earlier chapters, there is a substantial amount of research regarding how dating apps provide potentially new opportunities to expand the scope of romantic and sexual connection (See Chapter 1, 2 and 3). The question of what happens when one is trying to coordinate an in-person physical encounter has received less scholarly attention. Therefore, I attend to these sets of concerns in this chapter by examining the politics surrounding "the places and the supposed non-places of intimacy" (Antwi et al., 2013, p. 1).

My analysis draws on in depth interviews with StayUncle's co-founder (Sanchit Sethi) and one with the app's community manager. I conducted two interviews with Sanchit in 2016 when StayUncle had just started to gain popularity in terms of both media coverage and download numbers, and one interview in 2018 when the platform was well-established. Additionally, I conducted an in-depth interview with the app's community manager in 2018. I also examine secondary material such as the StayUncle website and app, a podcast series with interviews with listed hotels, ads released by StayUncle and a YouTube series giving men tips on

how to date created by StayUncle's Community Manager (as part of the app's community outreach efforts). In addition, though I do not refer to them directly, I incorporate perspectives gleaned from interviews with executives at a similar digital company (LuvStay) to make broader statements about love hotel aggregation apps.

The structure of this chapter is as follows –Tracing the origin story of the app, I push back against the media narrative of intrepid digital entrepreneurship that surrounds it. I then consider how demand for an app like StayUncle can be traced back to two large shifts in the previous decades. The first having to do with changes in media and economic formations during the 1990s that established the idea of *private, romantic*, sex as aspirational. The second having to do with increased surveillance of public spaces like parks as a result of government backed mandates for greater 'safety' in the 1990s, alongside social scrutiny in private spaces of consumption (e.g. malls and coffee shops). Then I discuss how examining an app like StayUncle can add to current scholarship at the intersection of sexuality, digital technologies, and spatiality. Following this, I map the ways in which StayUncle helps create new enclosures for physical intimacy by using digital capabilities to aggregate information about places where people can be protected from the public gaze and where their relationships are assured recognition without judgement.

StayUncle – Origins Part I – Entrepreneurs trying to make it

Sanchit Sethi (the founder of StayUncle) and I first met in the summer of 2016. Just a couple of weeks earlier, an article about his company published in an internationally popular *Quartz* magazine made StayUncle go viral. Our first interview lasted over two hours and took place beside a tea stand next to StayUncle's offices in South Delhi. Sanchit loves *chai*, and he

took particular pleasure in showing me his favorite *chai-wallah*. Over several cups of very strong, gingery tea, Sanchit gave me a rundown of his business journey up until that point, saying -

> When I was working in Goa, about three or four years back. I had just graduated from BITS [*Birla Institute of Technology and Science*] Pilani and luckily, I got a job in Goa. The place was really cool, the boss was really cool. It was a fertilizer production plant, I was officially the assistant manager of plant materials. My journey started from Goa itself, I didn't know what I wanted to do. I started planning trips with one of my colleagues who had graduated from BITS as well, and we kept going on trips. Because if you are in Goa, travel is all around. That is how I ventured from engineering into travel. We started planning customized trips for people. Most online travel companies - MakeMyTrip, Yatra[55] - they have standard package itineraries. Say you want to go out on a trip, they won't have a customized trip for you...So we thought we will prepare an algorithm where we will curate customized trips.

Sanchit worked on developing an algorithm for his travel planning service for two months, and then started to talk about his business plan to people he knew in Goa who were "passionate about travel". In these conversations, he learnt that most people he spoke to who were interested in customizable trips actually quite liked being involved in the planning process and enjoyed the element of human interactions doing so. Because of this, Sanchit dropped his algorithm driven travel planning platform idea and started talking to friends and acquaintances about their experiences travelling in India. Sanchit told me that he encountered several people who were

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[55] Both these travel companies are hugely popular and profitable travel booking portables, publicly traded on the stock exchange. MakeMyTrip was founded in 2000. Yatra was founded in 2006.

"frequent travelers" who disliked having to pay hotels for a 24-hour booking period when they simply wanted a place to "relax for a couple of hours" while waiting for their connecting flights or trains. Because these travelers were often with their families, they felt like they "could not compromise on the quality of their stay" (only lower end hotels tend to allow hourly bookings in India). Talking to hotel managers in Goa at this point, Sanchit was told that the best place to break into the transit travel sector was Delhi. Coincidentally, it just happened that the fertilizer production plant he was working at in Goa, relocated him to their Gurgaon office (on the outskirts of Delhi) around this same time.

Taking this as a sign, Sanchit quit his job at the fertilizer company just a few months after he moved to Delhi and devoted all his energy to his fledgling idea for a startup. He decided to call the "online transit traveler hotel booking service" – StayUncle, a name that would later become synonymous with love hotel aggregation apps within the industry. The name was not a carefully thought-out choice, rather, Sanchit finalized the name while "randomly typing words on GoDaddy" looking for an available domain name for a website. While in Gurgaon. Sanchit met Blaze Arizanov at a networking event, who joined him as a co-founder of StayUncle and led the fledgling business's marketing. Blaze, born and raised in Macedonia, came to India as part of an AIESEC internship in Gurgaon and stuck around trying to make it in the marketing business. The fact that a man from a tiny Eastern European country like Macedonia was responsible for founding a digital app startup rooted in solving a distinctly Indian problem, is evidence of the deep intertwining of global flows of labor, technology, and information.

Struggling to gain traction as an online transit traveler hotel aggregator, Sanchit and Blaze decided to focus on the one group of people that seemed most interested in hourly hotel rentals - couples. Sanchit and Blaze embarked on a mission to acquire seed funding for this new

version of StayUncle by spamming a database of LinkedIn contacts (YourStory, 2015). To their own surprise, they were successful in their efforts and received an initial investment of 20 lakhs (approximately $27000) which they quickly squandered on hiring several new staff and leasing a new fancy office. The pair were on the verge of giving up, when as part of a last-ditch effort to get word about their app out, began distributing flyers with StayUncle's tagline *Couples need a room not a judgment* in Connaught Place (a busy business and financial hub in the center of New Delhi). A journalist from Quartz magazine came across one of these flyers, contacted Sanchit and published a story on their venture that went viral. Thanks to the publicity from this article, StayUncle took off.

The article in *Quartz* was instrumental in StayUncle becoming a viral sensation and set the tone of the media narrative that would surround the app by presenting the StayUncle as one person's journey trying to save India's youth from religious vigilantes and corrupt police (Balachandran, 2016). The article titled *In conservative India, a startup is helping unmarried couples find a room* begins with the line - "An entrepreneur has come to the rescue of unmarried couples in Delhi and Mumbai". The article goes on to talk about Stay Uncle quite literally "rescuing" the progressive youth of India from the morally corrupt and ideologically regressive factions of Indian society.

The many national (e.g. Hindustan Times, The Hindu) and international (e.g. BBC, Buzzfeed) stories about StayUncle that followed the Quartz story, took the similar tone of Stay Uncle as "savior". Reports emphasized the youth and entrepreneurial spirit of the app's cofounder Sanchit and Blaze to highlight how single intrepid individuals, with the power of hard work and the Internet could change the fabric of Indian society. Thus, media coverage about Stay Uncle tends to frame the platform as an example of a digital tech startup fighting against

conservative Indian values. This idea of StayUncle as a social movement imagined by intrepid entrepreneurs working in India's app economy continued to be the dominant narrative in media discourse about the company during my first field visit in 2016 as well as when I went back in 2018.

Although StayUncle, unsurprisingly, embraced the celebratory framing of their venture by the media and continued to play up this narrative in their own marketing efforts, the platform was never started with the intent of trying to "do good" or "create change". In June 2016, Sanchit spoke with me about his experience suddenly coming under media spotlight following the Quartz article. During this interview, I was slightly nervous about being annoying and asking questions he had faced before. I asked him if there were any questions he got from journalists that he was tired of answering. He responded by saying that – "Journalists always ask, what do you want to change? which is such a lame question. We came into this because the transit traveler thing hadn't been working. If it was working, we wouldn't have started with couples". Thus, according to Sanchit, StayUncle's 'couple friendly' room service was simply a consequence of having to pivot away from a failing venture for transit travelers.

If at the level of corporate decision making the reason for why StayUncle exists is simply that its founders chanced upon an underserved market, the bigger question then becomes what factors might have led to the emergence of such a market in the first place. Here, contextualizing developments surrounding intimate possibility within broader sociocultural and economic developments in the region is important. Therefore, I approach this question by looking at developments taking place across sociocultural discourse, everyday practices, technologies, and economic systems from around the 1990s to the near present (2018 to be more

specific). Drawing on established scholarship I show how the scaffold[56] that gave room for platforms like StayUncle to emerge in 2014 was established in preceding decades through changing ideals surrounding middle class identity and premarital sex.

StayUncle – Origins Part II - Premarital sex, but make it fashion

The present day need for a platform like StayUncle can be traced back to shifting discourses around sex and sexuality starting in the 1990s. During this period, anthropologists such as Liechty (2003) Mazzarella (2003) and Brosius (2010) note that popular media in South Asia began to emphasize the importance of sexual compatibility and intimacy for the success of a relationship. For instance, exploring the wedding industry in major metros in India during that period, Brosius (2010) writes that the topics covered in bridal magazines circulating in large urban metros began to shift from being primarily about shopping and wedding preparations to topics such as sex, sexual dysfunction and marital issues that had thus far been taboo. Information in magazines started including advice specifically suggesting that couples explore premarital sex counseling as well as try to be more sexually adventurous overall (examples include advice to try 'outdoor sex' and 'sex in the shower'). Explaining the implications of the shift in topics covered by these magazines Brosius (2010) writes -

> "It introduces the notion that the pleasure of being together, of getting to know each other, as a ceaseless process of self discovery, and looking after more than two families, children and a household are subjects that have moved into lifestyle magazines.

[56] This is not a complete map of all possible factors, but a rough framework contextualizing the emergence of StayUncle within the broader sociocultural, behavioral, and technological shifts in the preceding decades.

> Moreover, the element of erotic stimulation and pleasure within a marriage allows for a new language of romance." (p. 302)

Later on the same page, Brosius (2010) continues -

> How what is availed and spoken of is really translated into people's lives, is another issue. In other words, for sex on the sofa one needs a sofa and solitude, for love at the beach one needs to afford a trip to Thailand, and so on. (p. 302)

Thus, there appears to be a gradual inculcation of intimacy as a "quality factor" of a good relationship and marriage through discourse circulating in magazines. Yet the actual physical spaces for people to engage in that kind of intimacy remain limited.

It is the emerging need for an appropriate and desirable "space" to engage in the aspiration lifestyle of romance and sexual exploration that Stay Uncle provides. The hotel rooms listed on the platform are not just safe spaces to have sex, they are desirable spaces to have the kind of sex that starts getting painted as fashionable in magazines in the 1990s - the kind in showers, on sofas and in complete privacy. This is not to suggest that before the 1990s young people in India never desired sex before marriage, or that intimacy and romance was never a factor in deciding marriage partnerships earlier, but rather to highlight how through the 1990s the idea of sexual intimacy as something that a couple should aspire to have, becomes a dominant sociocultural narrative within Indian media.

Ethnographic research in the late 2000s about the romantic lives of young people in urban India reveals how the shift in media discourse about sexuality during the preceding decades had begun to affect everyday behaviors and belief systems. In her ethnography of the intimate lives of socioeconomically disenfranchised youth living in the *bustees* (informal settlements or slums of Kolkata, Chakraborty (2010) observes that most couples' ideal sexual encounter was

completely different from the way sexual contact took place within the bustee they lived in. Space constraints within the bustee meant that a single room was often shared with multiple people, and it was common for people to have sex standing up in quiet corners of these cramped spaces. According to Chakraborty (2010), rather than desiring variations of the sex they saw around their home,

> Young women desired the middle-class experience of having sex on a bed in private, or in a rented spaces so they could lie down…young women learn from pornographic films and Bollywood romance that middle couples should have sex on a bed without other people in a room. Young people idealize these encounters, and in this search many bustee youth negotiated risk in order to achieve this fantasy (p. 12)

In the quote above we see how "sex on a bed" and "sex in private" become ideals of what "good sex" should look like as a result of the media circulating in the *bustees*. In this way, sex in a hotel room becomes emblematic of distinctly middle class/upper middle class sexual encounter. However, acquiring access to the kind of privacy seen in popular media depictions of romance involves both a significant monetary cost and social risk for lower class youth in these bustees. A platform like Stay Uncle does not resolve the issue of economic barriers but gives young people a level of control to negotiate the social risk involved in coordinating a sexual encounter noted above.

Part of the allure of the hotel rooms aggregated by StayUncle is that the rooms are places where people can play with engaging in the kinds of eroticized in the kinds of intimacy, romance, and sex they see in Bollywood movies, pornographic films, and advertising on dating apps. Available in a select number of hotels (and heavily advertised on the app) are free "love kits" provided by StayUncle to help achieve the kind of intimacy idealized in the media.

StayUncle introduced the “love kit” on their website by emphasizing both that it was risqué to use this kit and that people *should* be risqué, with the line - “Yes, we are all adults so what is the point of hush hushing sex all the time?”.

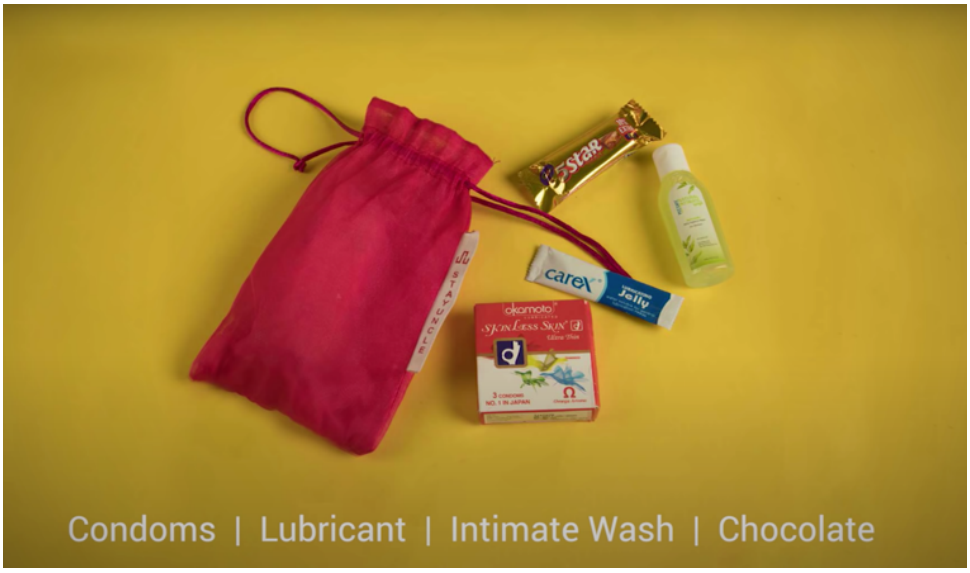

Figure 17 - The love kit from a video introducing them on StayUncle’s YouTube channel in 2018.

The kits in question take the form of a magenta pouch made of a silky synthetic fabric. The corner of the pouch has a label that conspicuously displays StayUncle’s logo. Within each of these ‘kits’ are a pack of condoms, a mini squeezable bottle of intimate wash for women, a bar of chocolate (usually five-star) and a sachet of lube. The rationale behind including condoms I was told was not *just* to encourage safe sex, but also help couples avoid public scrutiny and the hassle that comes with buying condoms from pharmacies where there is little privacy while pharmacists take your requests in small, crowded spaces. The chocolate included is generally an inexpensive ‘mini-Cadbury 5 star’ a caramel and nougat mix popular in the global south (priced at 5 Indian rupees or approximately 7 US cents). The lube is distinctly inexpensive as well - coming in a tear-off plastic sachet (priced at 2 Indian rupees or approximately 2.5 US cents). Therefore, it is not the *quality* or price of material, but the idea of that the objects in the “love kit” are explicitly associated with sex and privacy that lend them their allure.

I was told being "upstream from tradition" was part of the appeal of StayUncle. In their branding the app tried to normalize premarital sex, while keeping it risqué and dangerous to the degree that it allowed them to make their rooms feel special. Dikshi, the community manager at StayUncle explains –

> Our business is a [*pause*] I would not say controversial, but it is going upstream from the tradition. For our business also to run is the social aspect, if I don't change the social aspect of it, the business won't run. If the business won't run, then the social won't change. For Stay Uncle to run, I need to say it is okay to have premarital sex.

Thus, one way of conceptualizing the service that an app like StayUncle provides is that it is a (digital) platform whose physical network of hotels are places where people can consciously engage in the "fashion" of being the kind of person who has romantic relationships before marriage. In her ethnography of the lives of middle-class young women working in the "cyber hubs" of Hyderabad in 2009 and 2010, Gilbertson (2014) observes that premarital courtship was seen by her interlocutors as a way to aspire to both an elite lifestyle and signal their association with elite values. She notes that among the educated migrant women working in white-collar jobs in Hyderabad's Information Technology sector there was a continuous balancing act of trying to appear respectable and avoiding being perceived as conservative or orthodox. Among the young women Gilbertson spent time with, being open to premarital sex was seen as a desirable way to signal being 'in-touch' with global trends. However, premarital sex was only considered respectable when it was heterosexual and took place between individuals within an already serious relationship or courtship (with the ultimate intent of marriage). Much like the women who Gilbertson interviewed, the employees of Stay Uncle continually work to balance

the presentation of their service as respectable by advocating that premarital sex is both acceptable and aspirational.

Key to a platform like StayUncle existing were its relationship with the hotels it listed. The ability of StayUncle to "onboard" hotels to their database was a result of broader changes taking place within the app landscape and digital economy between 2008 and 2014. More specifically, the growth of Airbnb in India (both in terms of users and homes listed) started to affect the business of *small to medium* sized hotels. As a global company, Airbnb had a *non-discrimination policy,* among its many prohibitions was a clause that said listers could not discriminate against unmarried couples. Airbnb's policy was notably different from local hotel booking platforms in India (such as MakeMyTrip, ClearTrip, Yatra) that stated that the decision to allow unmarried couples was up to the hotel and not up to them.

Although there were still people openly flouting Airbnb's non-discrimination policy by including qualifiers such as "for married couples only" in their rental descriptions, there was still an overall increase in places that unmarried couples could look to stay because of the sheer number of rooms and homes made available (and searchable) by Airbnb. In other words, despite several listers on Airbnb often rejecting unmarried couples from renting their homes, the corporation's non-discrimination policy made it much easier for unmarried couples looking for a room to find a place to stay (without having to take the risks of being turned away at a hotel). This loss in business for hotel owners was leveraged by founders of both StayUncle and Luv Stay to incentivize hotels to agree to being "couple friendly".

In a magazine interview in 2018, Blaze Arizanov, one of the co-founders of Stay Uncle, explained the ultimatum he offered to hotel establishments, saying –

> We told them you can choose to be conservative, or you can open your eyes to the opportunity. There are thousands of young people with well-earning jobs and lots of free money who want to have fun. And if you reject them Airbnb will take your piece of the pie. (Safi, 2018)

When I asked Sanchit in 2016 about the way they initially managed to convince hotel owners to let their establishments be listed, he replied saying "In Delhi and most other cities it is about business, you give them good *dhanda*, good business and it is okay. They will be willing to do just about everything". It was this risk to hotel businesses that the digital app Airbnb represented that allowed Sanchit and Blaze to make a persuasive economic argument to skeptical hotel owners and get them to agree to advertise their establishments as "couple friendly".

Digital enclosures are culturally contextual and emerge through a combination of discursive, infrastructural, and social shifts. Here, it is worth juxtaposing StayUncle with a genre of app, commonly known as *women's safety apps*. These emerged as a discernable app type a couple years prior to StayUncle's jump in popularity as a digital response to the public discourse of fear about women's safety following the vicious Nirbhaya attacks in 2012[57]. Examples of safety apps include (but are not limited to*) Raksha, Safetipin, Himmat, Smart 24x7, Hawkeye* and *bsafe*. The design and interface of each of these platforms vary slightly from one another - some offer 'SOS services' where users can send emergency alerts to designated members on their

[57] This refers to the brutal rape and murder of a woman (Jyoti Singh Pandey) in December 2012 in Delhi. The unfortunate event galvanized a series of national and global protests drawing attention to sexual violence against women. Writing about the aftermath of the event Lodhia (2015, p. 89) notes "The severity of the attack and the inadequate response of the Indian government to the crime provoked nationwide protests and demands for legal reform. While other rapes have prompted public outcry, this particular crime inspired elevated interest, not only in India but around the world."

phone in case of an emergency, while others provide periodic notifications encouraging users to update friends and family their location while traveling outside the home. All of them share the same underlying premise - aggregate information about the "safety" of public spaces in the city to make recommendations about how *women* (in particular) should interact with those spaces. Or as Safetipin, one of the most popular of these apps, puts it on their website - "be a provider of data for safe mobility".

I compare love hotel aggregation apps with women's safety apps here, because, despite many functional differences, they share a similar approach to moderating the relationship between space and sexuality. A famous safety app like *Safetipin* depends on mobile phone-based functionalities of geolocation, targets women, deals with aggregating data about 'public spaces' and is designed to help avoid the risk of (unwelcome) sexual contact. On the other hand, StayUncle first started as a web browser-based site, has mostly male users booking rooms, deals with the semi-private space of hotels and hotel rooms, and works to enable sexual contact. Yet, despite these obvious differences undergirding the approach taken, both apps are concerned about safety. Moreover, they both utilize the affordances of the digital medium to aggregate and communicate information about the 'safety' of non-digital places to help people make choices about if and how they want to engage with those spaces.

The approach of both 'couple friendly' hotel aggregators and women's safety apps, can be summarized as one that emphasizes the important of education (by giving individuals information to make better informed decisions for safety). This is presented as empowerment or freedom yet has a distinct element of surveillance (through a demand for users to state their location) to receive "protection".

Sex, Space and Digital Technology. Ft. StayUncle

In a comprehensive review of sociological and STS scholarship at the intersection of sexuality, digital technologies, and spatiality, Adams-Santos (2020) observes at least three dominant themes. The first centers on the questions of how affordances of digital spaces such as chatrooms, forums and social networking influence the ways in which people identify, imagine, and perform their sexual identities (See for example Gray, 2009; Andrejevic, 2007). The second focuses on providing empirical evidence of the types of user behaviors and practices on dating platforms (See for example Albury et al., 2017). The third is research that investigates how marginality and community are negotiated by 'deviant' sexual subcultures such as furries and zoophiliacs in their use of varied online spaces (See for example Kavanaugh & Maratea, 2016)

Across all three strands of research Adams-Santos (2020) observes that there has been an overall shift from technological utopianism to a more technologically dystopian approach. The latter emphasizes the impact of inequities in the non-digital world on people's experiences in digital space. The original model of digital enclosure proposed by Andrejevic (2007) has a technologically dystopian bent that emphasizes the bounds put upon us because of the increased interlinkage between digital and physical spaces. In this chapter, I consider how digital enclosures, while often carceral and limiting, can also be sought after.

A digital world brings with it a demand to negotiate intricate politics of digital and non-digital place making and complex logistical management of intimate possibility through spatiality. The ways in which physical spaces for sexual contact are identified, managed, and commoditized through digital platforms tends to be phenomena that are relatively understudied. There is a narrow stream of research looking at how platforms like Airbnb change notions of

home, travel, and community by blurring the boundary between homes and hotel – and occasionally referencing issues of intimacy and privacy in the process (Roelofsen & Minca, 2018). And while there is writing about how gay men on dating apps, like Grindr and Scruff, coordinate sexual encounters in-person over the app (McGlotten, 2013; Dasgupta, 2018), research on dating apps generally tends to overlook the role that access to physical space plays in the continuation of intimate encounters started online, in favor of exploring what virtuality signifies for identity representation, gender, agency and performance (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Chan, 2017, 2019; Timmermans & Courtois, 2018; Ward, 2017; Duguay, 2017). Thus, to my knowledge there has been negligible empirical research or theory centric discussion regarding how "private spaces" for sexual contact are curated and made visible to the public through digital platforms. Therefore, using the heuristic of intimacy X enclosure to explore the formation of zones of sexual possibility at the level of built infrastructures (malls, parks, hotels), I trace how StayUncle *makes real* new intimate possibilities through its digital platform.

Avoiding policing and the public gaze

Earlier chapters primarily reference developments taking place in large cities or 'metros' in India because dating app use is largely confined to those cities and dating apps tend to focus their advertising initiative on urban demographics. However, StayUncle's growth between 2016 and 2018 was based on an increasing demand for its services in smaller (particularly Tier-2/ Tier-3) cities[58]. Tiers are a ranking system used by the Indian government to classify cities based

[58] Population-wise none of these cities are "small" by western standards. I use the phrase "small cities" to describe all cities that are not Tier-1 metros.

on size. Overall the country has approximately 4000 cities. There are 8 Tier-1 cities in India – these are Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Mumbai, and Pune – commonly known as *metros*. Large non-metro cities (e.g. Jaipur, Meerut, Kanpur) are classified as Tier 2 or Tier 3 cities. Beyond, their specific government classification. – Tier 1 cities are often culturally associated with having a far more modern and liberal cultural environment than non-metro cities. Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities have experienced a rapid increase in smartphone penetration in the last five years and are believed to be the "future" of the digital economy in India (McKinsey Global Institute, 2019).

Couples in public spaces in non-metro cities in particular face a heightened risk of being a victim of moral policing by right wing Hindu groups. An example of this kind of policing took place on Valentine's Day in 2018, in Bhubaneshwar. In this city on India's eastern coast, members of right-wing Hindu group - *Kalinga Sena* - threatened to "raid parks and malls" in the city and "rid them of couples celebrating Valentine's Day" (Hindustan Times, 2018). This kind of vigilante violence against couples being "together" in public has become commonplace in India and grown alongside the rise of the Hindu far right in the country. In Bhubaneshwar, *Kalinga Sena* took umbrage with the existence and celebration of Valentine's Day, a festival they believed celebrated 'western values' that were 'destroying Indian tradition'. In their protest against Valentine's Day, individuals of the opposite sex seen to be in proximity of each other in both public property (e.g. parks or the riverfront) as well as private property (e.g. malls, pubs, bars, and coffee shops) were potential targets of their wrath. In other words, it is notable that even seemingly upper class "private" property like malls were not free from risk for couples.

The community manager at StayUncle, Dikshi Aunty, points out that they believe that StayUncle has a unique role in small town India saying -

> In metros couples are less scared. Less scared of being together. In smaller cities there are still places where couples can't hold hands. So they are scared about those things.
>
> The questions I get asked in certain places like Jaipur or Nagpur - they will be very afraid of the police. So a couple walking in a park hand in hand, they will get reprimanded by the police and be asked the number of their parents when they are technically not breaking the law. So the kind of questions [they ask] are 'will we really be safe?' 'Will the police tell our parents?' These kind of questions still come up in metro cities, but couples are less scared because couples in a metro city are still accepted….they can hold hands, they can hold each other, they can't make out [*laugh*] in a public space. But being together in a public space is quite accepted.

In StayUncle's view the degree of scrutiny on couples differs significantly between "metros" and small towns. In the latter case, public spaces are often associated with significant risk of harassment by moral police (as well as actual police).

The same day that the *Kalinga Sena* attacks were taking place in Bhubaneshwar, StayUncle offered 'discounted room Valentine's Day deals' on hotels it listed. I consider this instance of vigilante moral policing in Bhubaneshwar to emphasize how these are significant issues people grapple with in small towns and highlight how being intimate within *private property* as a "consumer" does not necessarily mitigate one's risk of being a victim of attack. Given these factors - the hotel rooms aggregated by StayUncle afford couples seeking a place for intimacy an additional degree of protection against the risks of moral policing. It does not guarantee couples will always be completely protected (e.g. a 'couple friendly' room in an OYOs hotel in Coimbatore was raided by police in 2019) but rather provides another layer of "protection" between vulnerable bodies and potential violence, by allowing users to 'know'

beforehand that the hotel rooms they are seeking out are couple friendly, thereby mitigating as opposed to eliminating risk in in the intimate encounter. Here, looking at the activities surrounding intimacy X enclosure at the level of built infrastructures, we see how boundaries that define the *purpose* of a space get made and blurred by StayUncle. New physical enclosures for intimacy are created simply through a digital service aggregating information about existing physical spaces and allowing people to *purchase* access to them.

The importance of the physical body and the politics of how physical bodies move through space is important here. For instance, trying to find a reprieve from constant public scrutiny, individuals seek out as much 'privacy' as can be afforded by the urban landscape and their own clothing. Dikshi explains –

> What is the last resort…the girl will get a scarf, a *dupatta*, she will cover herself up completely. She will sit behind a bush and they'll make out there. Or they will go to some monument, find some dark space in some monument. That is what you have as a couple. There is a direct need for couples [in small towns] and StayUncle has played a huge role. A huge role. By giving people that opportunity where they can spend time.

The intense need for privacy, noted above, leads to people trying to fashion their own spheres of "private space" in otherwise clearly public areas (e.g. monuments and parks). People make the most out of the architecture of the built environment of monuments that create dark nooks and crannies help them feel alone, even while often in plain sight. Similarly, hiding faces through pieces of clothing such as a dupatta becomes a way for individuals to mask their identity while kissing and fondling each other in parks, even if they cannot avoid their bodies being scrutinized by people passing by while they do so.

The need for this self-fashioning of privacy in public spaces, is at least in part a result of changes in how public spaces in cities were managed during the 1990s. In a detailed history of *The Cultural Politics of Kissing in Mumbai* between 1950 and 2005, Annavarapu (2018) writes about how in the late 1990s in Mumbai waterfronts and parks began to be shut down at a specific time in the night (mostly 10 pm) since the city considered them to be unsafe after and no one who was "decent" would or should want to be out there anyway. She argues that the steps taken by city authorities point to an acute acknowledgment of the presence of romantic intimacy in public and the need to control it.

Accompanying increased surveillance of public spaces under the guise of ensuring people's safety, there is also increased media coverage of 'hapless couples' being harassed either by policemen and/or beggars, hawkers, eunuchs, voyeurs, and street urchins is striking in its omnipresence in articles through the late 1990s and early 2000s. Annavarapu (2018) notes that repeated contrasting of couples with defecating, spitting, or 'pissing' men is a symptom of a complicated relationship between class and sexuality. In this way, we see that through the 1990s and 2000s the 'danger' of being intimate in public spaces gets discursively embedded into the sociocultural fabric of city life in India.

The alternative to parks - an upscale restaurant or movie in a multiplex, still leaves amorous couples under the potential scrutiny of the public gaze when their relationship needs to be hidden from people they know because of oft cited 'family pressure'. This results in couples feeling trapped and under fear of being found out, even when they aren't under direct physical threat of the sort discussed earlier (e.g. policing). Increasing neoliberalization means that 'private places' of consumption such as malls and coffee shops become increasingly framed as safe havens of middle-class intimacies. Yet, the visibility of one's desires and possibilities of

surveillance in these consumption centric spaces make them unappealing for couples seeking the ability to strategically control who has visibility to their desiring selves.

Writing about the relationship between sexuality and space, scholars note that those whose sexual identities and desires are deemed socially acceptable by the nation state are easily able to access rights and privileges (e.g. being able to be intimate in public) while those whose sexual proclivities do not 'fit in' have to moderate the expression of their desires (Hubbard, 2001; D. T. Evans, 2007). In other words, sexual citizenship is granted to people whose desires align with national imaginaries of intimacy. This is true to a certain degree in Indian, for example the demands for queer rights and recognition of sexual citizenship discussed in the previous chapter.

However, most scholarship on Sexual Citizenship is based on western distinctions of private/public space that do not always map onto the realities of the built environment and placemaking in India. Highlighting the need for more postcolonial perspectives in mapping space-place dynamics. Richardson (2017) writes that there are, "contexts where, for instance, people have little or no access to private spaces and may be compelled to live in the public; or where they are compelled to live in the private and have little or no access to public spaces" (p. 218). A clear example of this can be seen in Indian cities within crowded settlements like slums and bustees, where homes are not "private" spaces for individuals, but are shared with multiple people and almost always open to flows of people from the surrounding streets and homes (Doron & Raja, 2015) .

Another common scenario are instances when the reach of the 'public gaze' extends to semi-private (or at the very least privatized spaces) like hotel rooms and pubs. For example, in 2009 the *Sri Ram Sena* entered the private space of a licensed pub in Mangalore (a Tier-2 in the

south of India) and beat up women within the establishment for "being immoral" and going against "Indian cultural values" simply for being at the drinking establishment (Susan, 2009). Therefore, in addition to recognizing the ways in which contextually specific cultural values, laws and state infrastructures mark certain spaces as "private" and others as "public", there is a deeper need to think about what Sexual Citizenship might mean when 'privacy' itself is a rare experience.

Beyond the danger of becoming a victim of the kind of moral policing discussed in the examples above, it is the continuous public scrutiny through friends and family networks that couples in small towns find oppressive. Sanchit's intimate knowledge of what it "feels like" to be young in a small town informs his company's approach. Sanchit grew up in Varanasi, a city on the edge of the Ganges river that was the setting for *Masaan* discussed at the start of the chapter. This city in north India is famous for its "burning ghats" where Hindu bodies are cremated, and ashes distributed into the waters of the 'holy water' of the Ganges. Varanasi is predominantly Hindu, culturally conservative and home to close knit communities. Chatting with me in 2018 he explained - "In Tier 2 cities people already know each other. It is already a small place. And then my parents…my father will know other people".

In other words, it is the continual public gaze and interconnected networks of 'community' that lend small towns 'that small town feel' and simultaneously makes dating in-person difficult for couples even when that is when they are in spaces where their physical safety is likely guaranteed. Here, the aggregation of "places to be intimate" on StayUncle increases visibility to premarital sex in the digital sphere. The number of hotel rooms listed on the platform lends a spatial significance to the popularity of premarital sex. At the same time, by emphasizing the need for privacy and providing an alternative to parks and malls that couples frequent, the

app erases public visibility to sexualized encounters in the physical landscape of cities (in places such as parks, waterfronts, roads, monuments etc).

"They just want to be with each other in three dimensions, just be in each others atmosphere"

Interestingly, more than offering access to a private space to "have sex" and engage in sexual contact the rooms curated on StayUncle also fulfill the need for people who want to get to know each other romantically to simply be in physical proximity of each other. The community manager explained, that in her conversations with users of StayUncle, they said that -

> They just want to spend time with each other, they just want to be in each other's physical presence. *They just want to be with each other in three dimensions, just be in each other's atmosphere. That's all they want. We have some married people who book with us because they are living in joint families in small spaces* [emphasis added]

The realization that it was not just sexual contact that users desired from hotel rooms, came to StayUncle's founders (both Sanchit and Blaze) gradually and resulted in them changing the articulation of their platform from being purely about sex to framing as the rooms they curate as a broader zone of unscrutinized, accepted 'contact' where young people could go to *hang out and hang around* with another person. In 2016, Sanchit spoke about this realization saying –

> We started with the sex 'wallah' [type] thing but talking to people more we are shifting to what it is like to be in a healthy relationship. People contact on Facebook saying it is not about sex. And we are trying to shift to this.

He elaborated on this point again later in the conversation, saying-

> Sometimes couples want to be intimate, they want to be in an intimate space. But many times I have couples who are not there to be physically intimate, but just because they want to hang out without anyone else being there. They just want to feel free and safe in that space…where we can just be with each other, where we can just have a conversation with each other. You know, just spend time with each other. So that desperate need is there for couples who don't get to spend time with each other.

The language of "intimacy" and "spending time" and "hanging out" as opposed to sexual exploration and contact become an integral part of what the physical enclosures offered by StayUncle provide to its users. Beyond being a space to be physically close, the rooms are also a space that allow couples to access physical proximity. As opposed to the many kinds of digital contact afforded by the growth of dating sites, increased mobile phone penetration and social media access - the physical locales where that kind of 'contact' can be embodied in physical space remains severely limited. The conversations and fights that can take place within the relative privacy of a 'one on one' messaging chat have no place to be recreated. Thus, 'having a conversation', 'hanging out' and 'spending time' without others looking on becomes extremely valued - or a "desperate need". While technically advertising themselves as a safe space to be private, StayUncle also serves the associated need to find "time" to be together.

The fact that the StayUncle rooms function as simply safe spaces to allow people of opposite genders to be in proximity with each other is indicative of the way in which the privacy afforded by their rooms takes over the functions of both public zones of contact (e.g. parks) and privatized zones of neoliberal consumption (e.g. malls) - they are both failing to fully meet the needs of young Indians seeking intimacy. Although the branding of StayUncle directly targets

unmarried couples, its use overflows to meet the needs of married couples who require 'privacy' in much the same way as their unmarried counterparts

Aggregating the affect of acceptance

Moving beyond aggregating a list of hotel rooms, StayUncle implicitly deals with the emotional experience desired by young couples who want to feel like their intimacy is "acceptable". The app's tagline "Couples want a room not a judgement" its co-founder explained was a way to reassure particularly female users who were wary of not so much legal, financial, or physical risks but rather the discomfort of their choices to be intimate with someone being made into a judgment about their quality as a person. For instance, Pooja, a PR executive from Mumbai who tried to book a room with her then boyfriend in 2016, found her marital status being repeatedly questioned by staff checking her in at the hotel. In an interview with *Asia Times* she describes her thoughts while checking into the hotel saying, "I could feel them *judging* me" and "it was just so awkward" (Kannampilly, 2020). It is the acute awareness of judgment and dislike of it, that is what couples booking through StayUncle are trying to avoid by utilizing a trusted middleman. In this way, StayUncle makes set an expectation about how users of the platform can expect to feel when staying at one of their couple friendly hotels.

Thus, StayUncle as a platform deals with not only spatial issues of helping couples find a safe space to have sex or being able to be in physical proximity with each other, but also in the emotional affect a user might expect while being intimate – such as not being judged. This emphasis on privacy and non-judgement has led to hotels listed on StayUncle changing their staff training to emphasize "couple friendliness". At a hotel in CR Park in Delhi that was one of the first group of hotels to be listed on StayUncle, the manager explains that while with their

staff would often knock on room doors to fulfill maintenance requests, with the increase in StayUncle room bookings he has had to give his staff instructions on the importance of leaving these "couples alone" and "treating them with respect". He describes his instructions to the staff saying - "It [they] is a couple and it [needs] private space, that is why he [they] are coming [to] hotel, so aap inhe disturb na karna. Do not disturb." I have left the Hindi language of "aap inhe disturb karma" in original here, because of the way in which the use of Hindi is emphasized by the English phrase, "do not disturb"[59].

One way of theorizing the underlying purpose of an app like StayUncle is looking at the platform as not simply a digital platform aggregating information about physical space, but the entire infrastructure involved in StayUncle (from hotel rooms, to the website, users, and the love kits) as version of code/space. Kitchin & Dodge (2011) theorize that the increasing ubiquity of software code in our lives, by focusing on how the coding of various objects, infrastructures and processes we use to move through the world have changed the nature of spaces and places around us. For, Kitchin & Dodge "code/space occurs when software and the spatiality of everyday life become mutually constituted, that is, produced through one another" (p. 6). It is the mutual dependence of code to make the space function, and the space to make the code function that results in code/space. Following this definition, the ecosystem of couple friendly rooms aggregated by StayUncle operate as code/spaces defined by their capacity to protect users from policing and public scrutiny, while enabling physical proximity of couples (usually heterosexual) seeking the affective state of "acceptance" of their desires. Without being listed on the StayUncle

[59] Throughout this interview for Dikshi Auntie's podcast (available on Soundcloud) the manager chose to use English even though it was not his preferred language overall, whenever he had to talk about sex or privacy.

platform the rooms would undoubtedly remain couple friendly, but the social narrative of the rooms as “a private judgment free zone” would not exist.

Looking back – Links to previous chapters

In prior chapters, I explored how broader cultural discourse regarding digitally mediated intimacy became intertwined with how dating app companies envision what the boundaries of intimate possibility should look like on their platform. Next, I dwell on some of the interconnections between how StayUncle approaches intimate possibility and those of platforms discussed in previous chapters.

StayUncle is *not* a dating app, yet its community outreach involves educating men in India how to date. Dikshi, or “Dikshi Aunty” as she calls herself on Stay Uncle’s YouTube channel ‘StayUncle TV’, began her journey as the company’s Community Manager by producing and starring in a series of videos with “dating tips”. The five-part video series was aimed at a heterosexual Indian male audience. In most of these videos, Dikshi sits in front of a single camera and gives male viewers advice on how to treat women, dress for a date, talk to a woman, ask a woman out etc. The impetus behind the video series came from founders of StayUncle noticing a common theme on Facebook comments to material they posted on the StayUncle page. Comments under their posts advertising StayUncle included “Can Stay Uncle provide me a partner?” and “How do you approach women". Following a conversation with Blaze about this trend, Dikshi decided to make one of the first ‘tasks’ of her new job as community manager to create answers to these questions. She said-

> Most of the men here don’t understand women. So part of the course is just to help them understand a little from a `woman’s point of view. Of what her expectations are. Simple

things like grooming" How to break the ice…How to keep a conversation going. Small things…. what is your body language [trails off…]

The language of "most men here" and "understand a little from a woman's point of view" echo the statements made by the dating app TrulyMadly's team while explaining their plans to introduce a paid service aimed at teaching male users how to chat to women (See Chapter 2). Despite the two app companies never having collaborated with each other, and only one actually dealing in the business of dating, both kinds of apps associate at least part of their purpose with what they perceive as a broader social imperative to give men the cultural competencies of cosmopolitan masculinity.

According to Dikshi, of the many videos she produced her favorite one was "the one about grooming" because most men thought it is either unnecessary or superficial but didn't realize women care about "that kind of stuff" all the time. The video in question is captioned "How to dress properly when dating a girl" and in this video Dikshi switches between general statements about "looking good" (e.g. "dressing up reflects who you are as a man", "wear clean clothes") and very specific tips on style (e.g. "When wearing a semi formal shirt, roll up the sleeve up to the forearm. Men look very masculine when they roll up the sleeves like that. Open the first collar button, make sure you don't tuck it in. Keep it outside, it looks relaxed, looks confident, looks like you are in control") Thus, ideals of masculinity (confidence, control, manliness) are addressed in detail, from the length at which they should roll up your sleeve to the number of buttons they should leave unbuttoned on your shirt.

The level of detail and need to educate audiences reflects a trend in writing about middle class identity since the 1990s. For instance, Brosius (2010) writes about how home designers in Delhi set up intensive courses for customers to teach them the etiquette of consumption. She

writes, “For instance, it does not suffice to possess a wine bar in order to belong to class one must know how and when to use It, and in style. Only then can a commodity become a status marker and maker. However, it can quickly transform into a status unmakes when owners lack the competence of knowing how to use it.”

Clearly wine bars and digital platforms (like dating apps and hotel aggregators) are materially different objects. Yet, underlying their use is the idea that they are status markers only if used correctly. Not knowing how to land a date on a dating app, the inability to succeed in looking presentable while meeting a girl and choosing the wrong wine for a guest carry a similar risk of allowing one to be recognized as not competent with aspirational visions of Indian middle-class modernity. At the surface level the obvious functions an app like StayUncle serves is to provide ‘knowledge’ that allows people to access spaces that lend them a sense of privacy - in that they are shielded from the direct public gaze and have reduced chances of being victims of moral policing. However, when examined through the lens of regional gender dynamics we see a far more subtle purpose that StayUncle serves - in that it is advertising a space where ones relationship will be recognized but will not be judged. In this way, it emphasizes that what makes a space intimate is not just a person’s ability to access privacy within the walls of a room, but that in the process of accessing that space one's intimate relationship is recognized and valued.

Conclusion

This chapter began with a vignette from the film *Masaan* whose viscerally powerful opening scene captured the risks of violence, blackmail and shame that can shroud unmarried couples’ search for a ‘room’ to be intimate in. Its setting - the city of Varanasi - with its small town feel and economy (of the burning ghats) directly built on hierarchies of the caste system

paints a picture of a different kind of India from the metropolitan backdrop of the earlier chapters of the dissertation. I chose to begin and end this chapter, with reference to that film not only because popular discourse used *Masaan* to summarize the need for an app like StayUncle in India, but also because the film is a reminder of the sociocultural conditions and contestations taking place in smaller Indian cities. These cities are rapidly digitizing and becoming the future target regions of dating app producers. What I offer in this chapter is a recentering of the consequences of physical bodies coming together in intimate encounters and the ways in which digital technologies play a role in negotiating access to physical places and creating imaginaries of what aspirational intimate possibility might look like. Thus, I explore intimacy X enclosure line at the level of physical contact and places in which such contact takes place.

Taking a multi-layer approach to understanding the emergence of digital platforms– I trace the origin story of StayUncle at two levels. At its most basic level I map the way in which its founders came to imagine the form the app would take and the circuitous process through which they built it. Here, I note that while popular media tends to frame the success of 'couple friendly' hotel aggregation platforms as a result of the entrepreneurial spirit of a young intrepid Indians trying to use digital technology to push the country into being more progressive, in reality the origin of StayUncle was a result of a chance discovery of an underserved user segment in the hotel booking space, not a personal mission to try and "do good". At a more macro level, I discuss how media shifts in the 1990s and new developments in the app economy (most specifically the growth of Airbnb) created the conditions for a digital platform like StayUncle to flourish. Drawing on secondary research, I show how "having sex in private" became an idealized version of middle-class intimacy in the India through the 1990s – and premarital sex became symbolic of cosmopolitan global culture (and its associated anxieties). Contextualizing

the development of StayUncle in wider socioeconomic, behavioral, and technological shifts in the region helps offer a potential insight as to *why* the need for a vetted 'enclosure' for premarital sex becomes information that people want aggregated.

Next, I consider the ways in which StayUncle can create a 'new kind of space' for intimacy, that serves as an alternative to established built infrastructures of malls or parks and is different from regular hotel rooms. While recognizing the significant risks of vigilante violence towards men and women being intimate, I suggest that in addition to the (obvious) service of aggregating "rooms for unmarried couples", StayUncle aggregates the "feeling" or "affect" of acceptance which is what its users crave when seeking a space to be intimate. In other words, it is not simply about accessing a safe space to have sex that has led to the popularity of Stay Uncle, rather it is the search for the emotional affect of "acceptance" or "non-judgment" while entering spaces to be intimate that Stay Uncle aggregates on its digital platform. It is the search for places or enclosures where users feel like their intimacy is "acceptable" that is integral to making StayUncle a "love" hotel aggregator. The complex politics of accessing places where unmarried couples can be intimate highlights how digital platforms can mark and make visible new zones of intimacy, particularly in smaller towns in India

Chapter 5
Conclusion

In the introduction to this project, I offered the coming together of "intimacy X enclosure" as a heuristic to playfully examine questions regarding the boundaries of intimate possibility at different levels of app production (e.g. advertising, interface design, partnerships, funding etc.). Rather than being a concrete theoretical proposition, delineating the intersection between *intimacy* and practices of *digital enclosure* through language reminiscent of a formula, was a way to creatively summarize the many nodes of intersection of the two terms. The concept of digital enclosures, perhaps ironically, also became a way to bind the scope of the dissertation. Intimacy is difficult to wield; as much as this dissertation is about how connection is created – it is also about how connection is bound. It is about moments of potentiality that open up through the affordances of digital platforms and systems, how those get contained and managed and the logics through which the needs for containment and management are articulated in the public sphere. In other words, at its core, this project has been about trying to understand the ways in which intimate possibility is foreclosed, enclosed, and disclosed through production practices of dating and dating adjacent app companies in India.

There is always the risk of sounding technologically deterministic when writing about how ideas about intimate possibility get managed through the production decisions of app companies. That this is not my belief is a point I want to reiterate in the conclusion of this dissertation. Throughout the dissertation I have tried to flag the ways in which digital enclosures surrounding dating and ancillary app's intimacy are culturally rooted, infrastructurally

embedded, and user mediated. To this end, over the course of this project I have looked at how enclosures surrounding intimate possibility are imagined and managed by the producers of four apps (Tinder, TrulyMadly, Delta, StayUncle). While examining these cases, I have tried to humanize the processes of digital app production by centering the narratives, myths, worries, concerns, and stories told by app producers, that have been left at the margins of traditional media scholarship on US and European digital industries.

Within the first case study I focused on *Tinder* and *TrulyMadly* and looked at how discursive enclosures about who they were for, became framed and reframed through advertising, media coverage, user feedback. I observed that in the early days after their launch in India (in 2015 and 2016), both companies were trying to understand how best to define their audience in ways that were commodifiable, aspirational and possessable. While analyzing four video advertisements (and the media discussions that surrounded them) by TrulyMadly and Tinder, I read the sub-text of class and gender performances within these texts and the ways in which they disclose visions of masculinity and femininity that are informed by visions about ideal Indian modernity. Here, I suggested that the process of getting to know users is a particular kind of intimacy – one that is built through a shared sense of familiarity. In Tinder's case in particular, I noted how instances of tension between users who had a clear vision of Tinder as a "hookup app" and Tinder's corporate mandate to talk about the app as a "social discovery" platform made visible frictions through which the app's corporate purposes got reframed.

In the second case study, I shifted the focus of my analysis to *Delta* and developments surrounding queer dating following the repeal of Section 377. This case explored the coming together of intimacy and enclosure at the level of app design and moderation practices. To help contextualize Delta's approach to framing itself as "India's first homegrown LGBTQIA+ dating

app", I mapped legal and social shifts surrounding the demands for public recognition of queer sexuality from the 1980s to the present day. Here, I paid particular attention to how developments in media (e.g. *Fire*) and technology (e.g. magazine personals, Facebook groups, dating sites) influenced possibilities of queer connection in the country. I observed that histories of state violence and surveillance towards NGOs working in the domain of queer rights in India had begun to influence the values and assumptions of producers within the digital dating app space. Through conversations with people working at Delta, I illustrated the dynamics at play in designing 'dating' for the many sexual orientations grouped under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella. The messiness that results in the coming together of intimacy and enclosure here is that of trying to contain expressions of queer desire that in many ways are defined by their resistance to being cleanly bound.

A theme that emerged in the first two case studies but was taken up most clearly in the final case of the dissertation, addressed issues with accessing spaces to be physically intimate in India. In this final case study, I examine how a space to be intimate becomes a valuable commodity and something that becomes both accessible through and mediated by digital platforms. Examining scholarship discussing the development of middle-class values and aspirations through the 1980s and 1990s, I show two things - First, I consider how the demand to have a room of one's own to explore sex emerges as a result of the sanitizing of public spaces, like parks, under mandates of protection. Second, I reflect on how the emergence of discourse about what "good sex" should look like in magazine, films, and other media forms in the 1990s influenced aspects of *StayUncle* (e.g. love kits). I acknowledge these media formations as a reminder that StayUncle's emergence as a digital platform is not only tied to developments within the dating app ecosystem, but also rooted in a broader class-based understanding about

sex and sexuality that started to take shape in India around the 1990s. Additionally, I noted the act of being "listed" on StayUncle did little to physically changed the space of the room, but created a broader social narrative about the nature of these spaces (as "judgment free zones" for intimacy).

The political stakes of intimate possibility in digital India

Overall, I situate my analysis of dating apps in a political, economic, and infrastructural context where public digital infrastructure is becoming increasingly privatized. The monopolization of the future of digitality in India by the state can be seen most clearly in the various initiatives grouped together under the digital India campaign. These range from an overnight demonetization move four years ago that aimed at pushing India into becoming a cashless economy to annual hackathon and coding challenges (e.g. SmartIndia, Hacker Earth) that incentivize students to submit "disruptive digital solutions" that can be used by government departments. There is evidence that through such initiatives post 2014, India's approach to IT governance shifted from trying to improve computer literacy to setting up private sector led technology platforms that are mandated as necessary by the government (MS, 2020).

In this dissertation I provided an in-depth account of how some of these broader questions surrounding the future of digitality in India and the role of private industry in constructing that vision, get worked through by (dating and dating adjacent) app companies. These kinds of apps are rarely considered as political, yet the dynamics of intimacy, romance and sex that are inherent within these platforms are issues that are politicized. Dimensions of this politicization have been touched throughout the chapters of the dissertation - Love Jihad (Chapter 1), moral panics surrounding the deterioration of Indian "values" (Chapter 2) the

legality of homosexuality (Chapter 3) and the rise of right-wing vigilante groups targeting unmarried couples in public and private spaces (Chapter 4). However, the case study structure of this dissertation meant that I had to limit the breadth of stories, vignettes and cases that could be included in each chapter to focus on those that most closely aligned with the key concerns taken up in the chapter.

Several of these unrecounted instances illuminate the broader political stakes of intimate possibility in digital India. For instance, in Chapter 2 where I explored the production decisions of Tinder and Truly Madly as they attempted to make their mark on their Indian audience, it is notable that Tinder collaborated with *Agents of Ishq* (a multimedia initiative on love, sex and gender issues in India) in 2018 to produce a video such as Love in the Garden of Consent ("*Ishq ke garden mein marzi hain minimum")*. The seven-minute-long video, listed on both Tinder and Agents of Ishq's YouTube accounts, delves into the complexities of sexual consent by having women sing about instances of coercion they had to negotiate. The video incorporates traditional aspects of the 'Lavani' musical genre, such as female dancers being supported my male dancers, a stage backdrop with music props, and women dressed in nine-yard sari. In this way the video pays homage to folk traditions in India that have long been sites of discourse formation surrounding eroticism, satire, and sexuality. Although the video was not central to Tinder's marketing efforts and received minimal views compared to its *Adulting Can Wait* campaign released in the same year, it very existence marks the ways in which dating app companies have become embedded within the politics of resistance and sexual education.

Then, now, ahead

The corporate positions of many of the interlocutors whose stories and insights were featured in the project have shifted since the time I first met them. Ishaan Sethi, co-founder of Delta, has moved on from an active role at the company to lead 'Brand Solutions' for a credit card payment startup in India. Taru Kapoor, then head of Tinder India, was promoted in late 2018 to General Manager of Match Group – India, overseeing all operations for the conglomerate in the region. Sanchit Sethi, co-founder of StayUncle, has launched a new digital platform focused on mindfulness called *Mind Uncle*. And Sachin Bhatia, the co-founder of TrulyMadly, stepped down from his role at the dating app company towards the end of 2018 and began investing his time in a new app creating more visually immersive online shopping experiences for Indian shoppers. While these shifts in positions may seem unexpected, they are emblematic of trends in the broader digital industry where labor flows among global techno-classes are often quick to change.

In the two years between wrapping up the final round of fieldwork in India for this project (in early March 2019) and the time of writing this conclusion (in April 2021) – a lot has changed in the world. Perhaps the most apparent change between when my fieldwork ended and the time of completing this dissertation is that there was (and continues to be) a global pandemic. The ramifications of this crisis are being slowly worked through by individuals, families, communities of belonging, national infrastructures, and transnational socioeconomic systems. One of the many consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic was that in order to contain it people were required to distance themselves physically from each other. These demands for physical distancing between bodies heightened our need for digital devices and infrastructures to retain a sense of connection with each other. Additionally, shared feelings of isolation, anxiety, loss and

unmooring that come with a healthcare crisis of global magnitude allowed a sense of intimacy to develop between people whose everyday lives might have otherwise held few shared experiences. For instance, enclosed within the confines of their 'homes', many people began to play with the possibilities afforded by digitally mediated intimacy in new ways.

Reflecting on the narratives about digitality surrounding the pandemic felt important while writing this project because (among many things) it turned the spotlight on global interconnectedness and demonstrated stark region specific differences between the capacities and attitudes of governmental regional intuitions. Additionally, it brought ideas, stories and issues surrounding digitally mediated intimacy to the fore of public conversation. The month of April 2020 was filled with news reports of couples holding virtual wedding ceremonies on Nintendo's *Animal Crossing* (Ramos, 2021), groups of friends reconnecting through concerts on *Minecraft* (Shafer, 2020), and in India dating apps like Tinder reporting an extraordinary spike in new signups and the degree of user activity particularly in the early stages of the pandemic (Abhik Sen, 2021). The constraints on physical proximity intersecting with the need for intimate connection, and varied affordances of digital platforms in mediating those connections, are heightened examples of the kinds of intimate possibilities and potentialities discussed throughout this project.

A moment of disjuncture like that of the Covid-19 pandemic also made clear the discrepancies between those whose desires and needs are most protected by access to digital technologies, and those whose needs are deemed as disposable despite their access to digital technologies. In April 2020, amidst the stories of dating app romances and Minecraft concerts were reports of internal migrants in India dying while trying to return to their homes after the country declared a 21-day national lockdown on the 24th of March. Faced with the loss of income

required to sustain their life in cities, hundreds of thousands of India's estimated 120 million internal migrants (Reuters, 2020) working in low paying positions in urban centers were forced to walk thousands of miles back home, as all transportation networks had been shut down by the government. Photographs taken by journalists during this time, and published in outlets such as the *BBC, Guardian, Scroll*, and *Reuters,* showed images of men and women clutching phones in their hands while trying to navigate their way back home, often succumbing to exhaustion on the way there. These images were reminders of the limits of smartphone connectivity and promises of a digital India.

I recount news stories at these two tonal extremes as a reminder that underlying the question how intimate possibility is imagined and mobilized by dating apps are larger concerns surrounding the limits and potentialities of living in a digital world. I offer this reminder, because it can become easy at times to forget these larger questions while examining the corporate minutia of dating app production practices. Yet, it is precisely because the dating app ecosystem in India is such a specific site (specific both because of regional context and industry type), that it was possible for me to empirically engage with production cultures surrounding an amorphous concept like that of intimate possibility with any degree of depth.

At the start of this dissertation I mentioned how actors within the dating and dating adjacent app industry spoke about their platforms with a sense of both promise and tenuousness. People at Delta worried about *how* to better value dating yet were convinced that *their* app could provide a new avenue to the queer community to express their desires. Despite their portrayal of confidence in their ability to "know" Indian users in media interviews, Tinder stepped into the water of cultural politics of gender in India with great care. And StayUncle's origin story is one of a gradual shift in company objective as its founders tried to home in on an emergent market

for short stay rooms, even as they tried to work out exactly who those rooms were for and why people might want them. Together the cases capture the many institutional precarities that surround digital ventures (from funding demands, to public backlash).

A question that I only partly address within this dissertation, but one that I wish to examine further in the future, is about how *exactly* the postcolonial condition changes how digital enclosures operate. Here I believe it would be worth carefully considering how India became a colonizing hegemon in its own right in the years after its independence in 1947. Expanding on the longer historical arc of developments in post-Independence India might be a way to draw links between how media trends seen most strikingly during 1990s liberalization, preempt the current moment of sociopolitical and technological disjuncture, particularly as it relates to ideas about intimacy and norms of sexual expression. Furthermore, one of the most interesting aspects of this project was the ways in which users thought about intimacy and ideas about intimate possibility. User perspectives made their way into the project, not because I looked for them but rather because as I was talking to people about my research during fieldwork friends and acquaintances came forward wanting to share their stories about using dating apps. I believe there is a certain need for these stories to be told and hope that future iterations of this project can incorporate them in greater number.

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