

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

Exploring Queered Digital Spaces in India: Prospects and Precarities of Looking for Love Online

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Abstract

The availability of arenas for companionship and romance has increased exponentially in the digital world. A google search on online dating apps for queer people in India shows a plethora of results. From the advertisements and articles appearing on the screen, most of them document the vast array of dating applications available in the country. The key selling points being ‘inclusivity’ and the promise of ‘safety’, these apps seem to offer a legitimate digital queercitizenship to its queer users by allowing cyberspaces as explorative avenues through which the hitherto closeted populace can form cyberqueer identities. Building on existing research, this paper seeks to investigate both the prospects and precarities of looking for queer love online. Ethnographic researches conducted by studies have shown a completely different narrative where queer lives remain shrouded by despair, dejection, threat, and loneliness. Cyberbullying, cybervictimization, and cyber-violence are some of the realities that co-exist with the ever-increasing online queer presence in India. This paper exposes the complex entanglements that informs, to borrow Halperin’s terminology, the ‘queer forms of existence’, and queer relationalities emerging in the cyberspace as a politically charged ‘counter-conduct’. This article will further interrogate the possibility of viewing the digital world as a space

operating outside of institutionalized heterosocial structures and thus examine whether cyberqueer bodies can be effectively integrated within a nationalist framework.

Keywords: Digital, cyberqueer, dating, apps, online.

Introduction: A ‘Queer’ Way of Life and Digital India

How can a relational system be reached through sexual practices? Is it possible to create a homosexual way of life?...To be ‘gay,’ I think, is not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual, but to try to define and develop a way of life. (Foucault 138)

The predominance of heteronormativity in India is a fact that cannot be denied. While ancient India boasts of the prevalence of same-sex love and queer forms of existence in its rich mythologies and folklores, the same India, in 2023, is struggling to legalize marriage equality, with hot debates prevailing all over the country about the ‘un-Indianness’ of homosexuality, and how homosexuality is a desecration of the sacred constitution of the Indian family. Existing alongside this is a parallel movement going on in Twitter (now ‘X’) where #SameSexMarriage is being used by Indians to express their opinions regarding the matter. While some are in support of marriage equality, others seem to be vehemently against it, raising slogans like “We were born from Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve”, which once again reinstates the prioritization of the heterosexual familial unit – father, mother, and children. This digital warfare becomes a case in point to illustrate the existence of ambivalent takes on the “homosexual way of life” (Foucault 1994, 138) which makes digital spaces both emancipatory as well as constrictive.

Rohit K. Dasgupta (2017) has observed that “the Indian queer movement in the last two decades grew almost simultaneously with the growth of new media” (2). Now, more than ever, the LGBTQ+ digital activism through social media is at its peak in the global south. A similar wave of change can also be noticed in the public reception of queer individuals in Indian cinema. When Deepa Mehta’s *Fire*, which is loosely based on Ismat Chughtai’s short story ‘Lihaaf’ (1942), was screened in cinema halls in 1996, the reactionary hate of the masses to the depiction of lesbianism left little to be said about the deep rooted intolerance of any form of ‘queer love’. In comparison to that, in the past couple of years, Bollywood has come up with quite a few movies with queer characters which were well received by the audience. Some of these movies include *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), *Aligarh* (2015), *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (2021), as well as Netflix India’s cinematic adaptation of *Cobalt Blue* (2022). A few Indian series like *Made in Heaven* (2019) and *Modern Love Mumbai* (2021) have also been praised for their informed portrayal of queer lives and their ongoing struggle with societal acceptance.

Paralleling this development is the rise of dating apps with ads targeting the LGBTQ+ community to promote themselves as inclusive and progressive. While ‘As You Are’¹ was the first dating app in India that was created exclusively for queer individuals, an app like ‘Bumble’, which was initially meant for heterosexual people, began to broaden its horizon and include the queer community. Despite such steps towards inclusivity, one might ask, why is the fight for equality still continuing? It is in this regard that I would like to bring up Pawan Dhall’s article “Decriminalized but not destigmatized” where the issue of the persistence of stigmatization of LGBTQIA+ is raised. This paper is directed towards an understanding of how the perpetual stigmatization of the LGBTQIA+ can be witnessed on digital platforms, especially on dating apps.

¹ ‘As You Are’ officially closed its app on 31st July, 2023.

The Emerging ‘Cyberqueer’ and a Whole New World of Queer Possibilities

The question can now be raised – what might be the connection between queer studies and digital humanities? Ruberg, Boyd and Howe (2018) writes on the relationship between the two: “In one sense, queer studies and the digital humanities (DH) share a common ethos: a commitment to exploring new ways of thinking and to challenging accepted paradigms of meaning-making” (108). Donna Haraway’s conceptualization of the “cyborg” as a rupture in the conceived binaries pertaining to gender and sex leading to a “confusion of boundaries” (Haraway 1985, 150) further consolidates the symptomatic relationship between queer studies and digital humanities. For Donald Morton (1995), in this fast paced digital world, “the return of the queer today is actually the (techno)birth of the cyberqueer” (369). According to Morton, the cyberspace allows queer individuals to rewrite their histories, their realities by assuming new roles in the technoscape. As they engage with the virtual world, they enjoy the freedom of forging new identities, claiming a space that was perhaps denied to them in the real world, and hence actively partake in a digital historiography of queer existence.

What Morton posits comments significantly upon the many ways in which technological advancement revolutionized narratives surrounding non-normative interactions: “By manipulating the machines, the user-subjects write virtual histories according to their desires and seek to evade present historical conditions. Cyberspace is thus symptomatic of the (post)modern displacement of need by desire” (375). To further the argument, Bright’s statement, “You can be any BODY you want to be on a fiber optic network” (cited in Morton 60-61), seems to point at the reconfiguration of the queer body into the digital space, suggesting its fluidity and malleability, which again implicates the deconstruction of binarizations. For Paromita Pain (2022), digital spaces become the “primary sites through which communities are forged, questioned, and critiqued” (1). It can then be inferred that the disembodied

subjectivity given to them, along with the promise of safety and anonymity, encourages them to come out of their digital closets and engage in arguably wholesome virtual social interactions with other members of their community.

It is by keeping in mind the climate of ideas concerning digital intimacy that this paper attempts to investigate the prospects and precarities of looking for ‘love’ online as queer individuals. The availability of arenas for companionship and romance has increased exponentially in the digital world. A google search on online dating apps for queer people in India throws open about 4, 85, 00, 000 results in 0.54 seconds². From the articles appearing on the screen, most of them document the vast array of dating applications available in the country. The key selling points being ‘inclusivity’ and the promise of ‘safety’, these apps seem to offer a legitimate digital queercitizenship to its self-identified queer users by allowing emerging cyberspaces as explorative avenues through which they can form cyberqueer identities. Further, Powell (2022) observes how dating apps increased the ability for queer individuals to connect across physical distances and even perhaps stumble across someone in their own locality. But there remain several issues that time to time throws into question the reliability of these dating apps, the legitimacy of intimacies born online, and above all else, the safety of the individuals involved, which will be addressed in the following section of the paper.

Cybervictimization, Cyberbullying, and Sextortion: Considering Some Cases in India

While the prospects of online dating are seemingly many, it is necessary to critically analyse the precarities that threaten online queer existence. Ethnographic researches have shown a completely different narrative where queer lives remain shrouded by despair, dejection, threat, and loneliness. In a study conducted in America it was revealed that members of the queer community were particularly likely to face harassment online (Vogels 2021). While it is true

² As per my Google search on 16th April, 2023, 3:21 PM; results may vary in future searches.

that the digital space allows queer individuals to experiment with their sexuality and identity, it also simultaneously renders them vulnerable. In India, more research pertaining to the questionable success of looking for love online for self-identified queer individuals is needed. Compared to the large scale statistical data available in researches conducted in the West, in India, a slew of articles on queer individuals being victims of cyberbullying and even sextortion document the precarity that shrouds queer presence online.

According to Gámez-Guadix and Incera (2021), sexual minorities tend to rely on the internet more so that they can utilize specifically designed socialization platforms to carry out clandestine meetings in order to avoid social humiliation and homophobic bullying. Giuliani (2007) writes about the inevitability of precarity that haunts the existence of openly queer individuals (117). Cybervictimization, cyberbullying, and sextortion are some of the forms of harassment caused to queer individuals through the use of communication technologies. Both cyberbullying and sextortion fall under the purview of cybervictimization, which denotes the intent of explicit harm to the victims (mental, and even physical when constant cybervictimization triggers self-harm) by perpetrators through the use of technology. Cyberbullying involves the posting of harmful texts or images on the internet, and even stalking, mockery, and other forms of physical harassment (Feinberg and Robey 2009). Sextortion is the practice of extorting money or sexual favours by threatening to reveal compromising details or pictures of the victim. Closeted queer people are easy victims of sextortion since the secrecy of the victim's sexual orientation or gender identity is known by the predator.

Abraham and Saju (2022) draws attention to the nature of cyberbullying seen in India as stated by their respondents in their research work. Respondents reported feeling unsafe on online

spaces and felt that they were being constantly targeted for their sexual orientation and gender identity. In extreme cases, they were faced with death and rape threats, abusive language, and body-shaming. A case reported by Chakrapani for The Times of India on 8 December, 2022, documents how a bisexual man, married with kids, was brutally attacked at a cruising spot by a man who had enticed him to a secluded location with the promise of a hook-up, but then had threatened him with revealing his identity before his friends and family if he refused to give him money. The article quotes L Ramakrishnan from the NGO SAATHII:

People who are most vulnerable to blackmail or extortion are usually those who have not come out at work, or to their families and friends [...] The decriminalization of Section 377 hasn't necessarily made it easy for gay people to come out, and predators use this vulnerability.

The same article also reports how scammers have access to the identities of queer individuals from the dating apps and then arranges calls, introducing themselves as the police, and threatens to reveal their identities to their families.

In another news article from The Times of India published on 13 February, 2023, it has been reported that a gay man from Nagpur filed a police complaint of sextortion. This counts as one of the very few cases of sextortion being reported to the police since most of the victims remain silent because of the shame, taboo, and stigma associated with being outed in public. Roy (2023) notes how queer people face several barriers in the process of reporting crimes for they feel vulnerable and disadvantaged. Roy has also categorized the stages of victimization of queer people – while creating profile on a dating app which violates user privacy, in the process of chatting, they might encounter blackmailing in the form of the dissemination of private nude pictures or erotic chats sent across on the internet. In this regard, Roy writes: “This

victimization is also a good example to illustrate that technology is so embedded into our lives, that what renders one vulnerable are multiple actants (both human and non-human): a feature of digital society” (100). This illustrates how both society and digital platforms have a long way to go in terms of being inclusive of queer individuals.

An Ethnographic Study on the Dating Experience of Self-Identified Queer Individuals on Bumble, India

A very brief ethnographic study was conducted [by me] at the beginning of this year (2023) where a few self-identified queer individuals were interviewed on the online dating app, Bumble for the purpose of illustrating the central argument of this research. Despite being limited, the study actually points at certain interesting observations that contributes significantly to some of the hypotheses that informs the thrust of the paper. For the ease of understanding, and specifically because none of the respondents, barring one, clarified their pronouns, they will be referred to as they/ them. Further, for the same reason, they will be addressed by the term ‘queer’ as an umbrella term substituting their individual sexual identity, orientation, and preference(s).

To initiate the analysis of the study done, the observations drawn from the ‘non-responsive respondents’ will be taken into consideration first. In due course of the analysis, the decision to opt for such a paradoxical title will be accounted for. All of them were prospective respondents and were open to engaging in a conversation with me, and upon revealing the intention of interviewing them, two of them chose to no longer engage, will the other two consented to being interviewed by me. However, once the questionnaires were sent across, they chose not to respond, and to this day my questionnaires remain unanswered. The attempted

interview could easily be considered as a failed interview, but the following deductions could be made: firstly, there is my own amateur approach to the entire process, ambushing people with questionnaires on dating apps isn't ideal; and secondly, there is the possibility that beneath their reluctance and refusal to respond lurks a fear of exposure – online dating apps often leave queer individuals exposed to strangers with malicious intentions. Since in order to join a dating app a verified profile picture, information on sexual orientation and preferences, as well as other information related to interests, work life, academics, and so on, are required to make the algorithm connect with like-minded people, queer individuals become easy targets, so perhaps they were being cautious.

Another respondent took a dig at academia (since it was made known to them that the research was intended to enrich my academic interest), which led me to ponder over the purpose of my research, the role that academia plays in it, and consequently, by extension, the value of allyship and the future of queer studies. Dr Niladri Ranjan Chatterjee, faculty at the Department of English, Kalyani University, provides a solution to this conundrum. In his talk “Sympathy, Empathy or ‘Speaking Nearby’: Queer Positionality”³, Dr Chatterjee denounced sympathy, empathy, and allyship as extremely patronizing. The approach that he suggested was one of “speaking nearby” which was put forward by Vietnamese filmmaker and theoretician Trinh T. Minh-ha, which is “a speaking that does not objectify...[but] reflects in itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it” (87), that becomes a force of queer politics.

³ (2023, April 10-15). *Sympathy, Empathy or ‘Speaking Nearby’: Queer Positionality*. Gender Sensitisation: Towards A Humane Understanding of LGBTQ Identities, Varanasi.

The respondent that did actually respond to my questionnaire confessed to having being disappointed in their digital overtures at intimacy. By their own admission, they simply joined Bumble to make acquaintances and was not actively looking for love online. They also admitted to being subjected to homophobic comments from strangers on Tinder, and found it to be a “problematic and discriminatory space”. The homophobic bullying and hatred received online is to be considered as a form of cybervictimization faced by the respondent. Their responses affirmed the ambivalent take on online dating apps that is the thrust of this paper and breathes life into discussions surrounding the questionability of the success of online dating apps.

Finally, although not interviews, two very interesting bios in Bumble had caught my eye, both of which set the stage for an extensive discussion on the nature of online sexual activity. The first bio was the account of a gay man who was explicitly seeking sexual encounters with other gay men. Gay men who may stumble across this account will know immediately that this is not an invitation for a romantic investment, but rather an indulgence in a one-night stand. This shows how online dating apps promote hook-up culture and also cruising – for this also drives home the point that there are self-identified queer individuals who are browsing dating apps for casual sex, which, as illustrated via the cases discussed in the previous section of the paper, leaves them vulnerable.

The second bio belonged to a Bumble account jointly operated by a married couple who was actively seeking out other couples for “threesome & groupfun”, tagging along with it was the promise of a “safe place”. Two issues stand out from the couples’ Bumble bio – firstly, it confirms the existence of non-normative couplings other than queer relationships; secondly, the emphasis on “safe place” which ensures privacy and confidentiality. This goes to show how dating apps are also embracing casual polyamory, as opposed to legitimized monogamy in the traditional Indian cosmology, but the question of safety remains. Hence, the ethnographic study

undertaken paints a picture of hope and heartbreak which underscores the ambivalent experience of queer individuals on dating apps.

Conclusion: Towards a Queer Digital Futurity

What emerges, essentially, is a conflict between opposing ways of life, where one is seen as a necessary subversion of the other. The politicization of ‘love’ is central to the argument for around it revolves the homonormative and heteronormative ways of life. Love is no longer to be considered as a sentiment in modern day discourses for it is as political as sex and marriage. For Halperin (2019), ‘queer love’, or love that does not cater to the standards of heteronormativity, is to be seen as a counter-conduct to challenge the standardization of a heterosexual emotional life and social agencies that “guide, shape, and routinize modern practices of love, intimacy, and personal association” (398). ‘Queer’ as a way of life in the digital world is seen to be constantly threatened, exploited, and made vulnerable and precarious. While it is true that online dating apps provide individuals with counter-normative sexualities to construct their identities and engage freely in a digital community that the physical world cannot guarantee, the extent to which those apps can truly forge online queer communities is doubtful to say the least (Pym 2021).

The legitimization of the queer way of life, recognition of queer love, and its political potential in narrating the nature of relationships are integral in order to tackle the issue of precarity faced by queer individuals online. LGBTQIA+ people being easy targets for scammers and extortionists is primarily because they lack legal protection. Existing alongside the lack of criminal justice for queer individuals is a persistently heteronormative society’s homophobic slander. The stigma surrounding coming out of the closet before friends and family continues to have a chokehold over queer individuals. The paper shows with significant

illustrations that digital spaces in India have not been completely queered, but is still in the process of being queered, since the de-stigmatization of queer individuals is still under way.

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