

**VICTIMISATION EXPERIENCES OF USERS  
OF GAY DATING PLATFORMS IN INDIA: AN  
EXPLORATORY STUDY**

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## Abstract

This thesis is an exploratory study into the victimisation experiences of the users of gay dating platforms in India. Drawing from 17 interviews with people who have experienced victimisation and support workers, this thesis reports on 11 forms of victimisation. The thesis uses Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and Digital Criminology to conceptualise these types of victimisation as “network” activities, consisting of both physical and digital elements. Using ANT, it highlights the role of gay dating platforms, societal queerphobia, sex-negativity and family honour in causing or exacerbating these forms of victimisation. It further discusses the impacts of such victimisation on the users of gay dating platform and highlights the unique challenges that they face in seeking help or redress because of structural disgust of queer sex and queer people. As such, it contributes to the emerging field of Queer Criminology by highlighting a unique context in which queer people face crimes, and the structural and interpersonal barriers they face after experiencing a crime. The thesis foregrounds participant voices and uses a sex-positive criminological framework to inform recommendations for structural and institutional changes to prevent these kinds of victimisation and offer better support to people who experience them. By doing so, it moves away from making users solely responsible for their own safety and calls for societal change in creating a sex-positive, supportive atmosphere for people who have faced gay dating platform-related victimisation. The thesis fills an empirical gap in the literature on ‘dating apps and safety’ in the Indian context, and contributes to the emerging fields of Digital Criminology, Sex-Positive Criminology and Queer Criminology.

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# List of Abbreviations

<b>ANT:</b>	Actor Network Theory
<b>CSE:</b>	Comprehensive Sexuality Education
<b>FWB:</b>	Friends with Benefits
<b>HIV:</b>	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
<b>IBSA:</b>	Image-based sexual abuse
<b>LGBTQIA+:</b>	A popularly used initialism for people with diverse gender and sexual identities, and stands for lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and others
<b>MSM</b>	Men who have sex with men
<b>NALSA:</b>	National Legal Services Authority
<b>NCA:</b>	Non-corporeal actants
<b>NGO:</b>	Non-governmental organisations



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# Chapter 1: Background and Introduction

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I first heard of gay dating platform-related victimisation in 2018 when a Grindr<sup>1</sup> date of mine narrated his experience over coffee in Greater Noida, India. He detailed that he had arranged to meet someone from Grindr for a hookup at his place. His intended hookup had arrived at his place with two associates. They assaulted him and robbed him of his belongings. He showed me pictures of his physical injuries on his phone and told me how ‘unfortunate’ he had been. He explained how he could not tell anyone what happened. He had to lie about his injuries at the hospital, at work and even to his family. I remember leaving the cafe with much shock at the incident, and a sense of irritation over gay dating platform users’ helplessness. By then, I had been an active user of two popular gay dating platforms<sup>2</sup> in India: Grindr and PlanetRomeo (now known as Romeo), for almost five years. I had used both these platforms, off and on, while residing in India and the UK, where I had lived for a year. Although I was aware of crimes happening during hooking up with strangers through gay dating platforms, I had not considered the extent of these forms of victimisation, and all the types of risks that gay dating platforms could pose to their users. However, this story shared by a date over coffee first piqued my interest in the victimisation collectively experienced by people who use gay dating platforms in India.

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<sup>1</sup> Grindr is a popular gay dating platform.

<sup>2</sup> Gay dating platforms are web or mobile based digital platforms or apps that sometimes use Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and act as spaces for “location-based dating” for queer people (Dasgupta, 2017, pp. 8-9); Quiroz, 2013).

Soon after this incident, I started noticing more and more anecdotal evidence of gay dating platform-related victimisation. These included cautionary tales posted on LGBTQIA+<sup>3</sup> Facebook groups and pages based in India, where people shared detailed emotive stories of their own or their friends' victimisation by someone met via a gay dating platform. Other evidence that I came across included flyers and pamphlets distributed by civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and online support groups disseminating information on “safe online dating practices” (see Good as You Bangalore & Vaadhi, 2018; K, 2017; Queer Friendly Lawyers Network & Varta Trust, 2018; Vasudevan, 2011). Social media posts by NGOs and LGBTQIA+ pages also periodically highlighted the seriousness and pervasiveness of these types of victimisation (see for example, Harmless Hugs, 2019; Queerythm, 2019; Yes We Exist, 2019a; Yes We Exist, 2019b). Some NGOs, community-based organisations and social media pages also published informative videos explaining the different types of victimisation taking place via gay dating platforms (see asyouare.in & yesweexistindia, 2022; The Humsafar Trust, 2021; Varta Trust, 2021) and ways of accessing (limited) support. A prominent lawyer handling such cases explained receiving 15-20 crisis calls a month in a recent panel discussion on the “LGBTQ dating app crisis” (Humsafar Trust, 2020). Nevertheless, there has been no government acknowledgment or data on such victimisation.

The Indian media has also reported on several kinds of victimisation that occurs through gay dating platforms, including blackmail, extortion, theft, robbery and physical and sexual assault (see Mehta, 2018; Queerythm, 2019), image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) (Times News Network, 2019a) and romance frauds (Chandran,

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<sup>3</sup> LGBTQIA+ is a popularly used initialism for people with diverse gender and sexual identities, and stands for lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and others.

2021). Many of these incidents involve ongoing victimisation (image-based sexual abuse or blackmail continuing beyond the first encounter, for example) as has been highlighted in several news reports and news blogs from India (see Ansar, 2018; A. Bhattacharya, 2018; Mehta, 2018; Orinam, 2014; Parussini, 2015; Sengupta, 2016; Times News Network, 2014).

In recent times, especially after the decriminalisation of “gay sex” by the Supreme Court in India in 2018, many perpetrators of gay dating platform-related crimes have been arrested by the police across India, including in New Delhi (Singh, 2020), Agra (Jaiswal, 2019), Noida (Singh, 2019), Greater Noida (Express News Service, 2021), Gurugram (Dhankhar, 2022), Kolkata (Times News Network, 2019a), Ahmedabad (Khanna, 2022; Times News Network, 2019b), rural Coimbatore district (The Hindu, 2022), Coimbatore city (The Times of India, 2022b), Azamgarh (Uttar Pradesh) and Pune (Khandge, 2020). The police have recovered cash amounting to lakhs of rupees, multiple mobile phones, laptops, motorcycles, cars, watches and jewellery from victimisers (for examples, see Dhankhar, 2022; Khanna, 2022; The Times of India, 2022a). The reported cases are potentially only a tiny fraction of the actual number of cases, due to individuals’ inability or reluctance in approaching criminal justice agencies to seek redress (see Dhankhar, 2022, Khandge, 2022). This is often because any official redress mechanism would require a gay dating platform user to disclose their queer sexual identity and/or interest in queer sexual behaviour to the police. Such disclosures have been reported to lead to negative repercussions in people’s personal and professional life (see Comstock, 1989), and hence, most people using gay dating platforms are apprehensive about approaching criminal justice agencies. This issue is especially acute in the Indian context, given the queerphobic social setting of India (see

International Commission of Jurists, 2019). This makes users of gay dating platforms particularly vulnerable, and thus, an easy target group for victimisation in India.

It is these forms of victimisation, and associated issues that form the primary site of investigation for this thesis. In light of the limited data and empirical evidence on these issues, this thesis is a broad exploratory study of gay dating platform-related victimisation in India. Before explaining the specific research problems that this thesis addresses, I offer a general overview of the socio-legal and digital landscape of queer India, to help illustrate the setting in some more depth in which the victimisation takes place. I then introduce the specific research problems and gaps that this thesis addresses. Next, I briefly explain some terminologies used throughout. I subsequently present the research questions that the thesis addresses, the broad arguments that the thesis makes, and the theoretical underpinnings on which it is based. Finally, I provide a thesis structure to act as a roadmap for the thesis.

## **1.1 RESEARCH LOCATION: INDIA**

Although India is a vast and multicultural nation, in this section, I provide a snapshot of the broader queer landscape of India to help contextualise the societal and historical backdrop in which gay dating platforms operate in India. In this section, I discuss the multifaced queer identities in India, the socio-legal context of queer rights, societal attitudes, and queer people's use of digital media.

### **1.1.1 Queer identities and terminology in India**

Indian queer identities are diverse and multifaceted. Gay men's movements started in India mainly as a resistance to police perpetrated atrocities against them (Narain & Bhan, 2005, p. 9). The police have been documented extorting money from, illegally detaining, entrapping, assaulting, and 'outing' queer people (Bhandari

et al., 1991; People’s Union of Civil Liberties [PUCL]-Karnataka, 2001). A rise in such atrocities led to queer people organise themselves and start gay people’s movements (Bhandari et al., 1991). Such mobilisation coincided with economic liberalisation and globalisation, which led to the import of Western gay identities to India (Altman, 1996). In other words, many in India appropriated the Western LGBTQIA+ labels as familiar tools of resistance against heteronormative hegemony. However, many NGOs and scholars also resisted such terms as being too rigid to encapsulate the diverse sexual identities that existed in India (Boyce, 2007; Dave, 2012, p. 18; Mitra, 2010, p. 166). They advocated for culturally relevant terms, like *kothi*, *panthi*, *khush* sexualities, or less definitive terms like “homoerotically inclined” and “men who have sex with men” (Dave, 2012, p. 19). However, many have also argued that the need for concrete labels: whether Western or ethnic, arose out of the need for NGOs to categorise themselves according to those labels, to be able to access foreign funding for HIV prevention and other advocacy work (see Boyce, 2007; Strauss, 2022). So, there exists an uncomfortable coexistence of local and global sexual identities in India.

There are several local/traditional sexual identities and cultures in India. For example, *panthis*, *parikhs*, or *giryas* are local terms used to describe “masculine” men who are predominantly attracted towards women or “effeminate” men and play a penetrative role in sex (Dutta, 2014, p. 160; National AIDS Control Organization [NACO], 2007, p. 12). *Dangas*, *kothis* or *dhuranis* are terms used to describe/self-identify as effeminate men who mostly play a receptive role in anal or oral sex (Boyce, 2007; Dutta, 2014, p. 160; NACO, 2007, p. 12). *Kothi* is also sometimes used to describe transgender women (Solidarity and Action Against the HIV Infection in India [SATHII], 2009). Similarly, “double-deckers”, are used to describe



those men who are “masculine” or “neutral” in appearance, are sexually attracted towards other men and play both active and passive roles in sex (Asthana & Oostvogels, 2001). Asthana & Oostvogels (2001) elucidated that double-deckers are regulars in cruising areas, and are those for whom sexual orientation is a “key state of being” and can be considered similar to the Western gay/bisexual category. Additionally, *hijras* are a prominent gender-diverse socio-cultural group in India (and South Asia). Hijra identity is a unique blend of gender and sexual identities, and includes transgender women, male assigned people who cross-dress, and non-binary people (sometimes identifying with a “third gender” or *tritiya prakriti*). Hijras live in unique close-knit apprentice-based residential clusters (*gharanas*), hierarchised between *guru* (teacher) and *chela* (disciple) (see Chakrapani et al., 2018).

It is notable that categorising queer people according to local terminologies is not without problems. While such categories were useful in devising intervention strategies for HIV prevention (see for example, NACO, 2007; SATHII, 2009) and in some instances, access foreign funding and resources, essentialising categories of queer people, with self-evident meanings and behaviours, obstructs complex understandings of sexual subjectivity (Boyce, 2007). Emphasising the importance of de-essentialising terms like *kothi* or *panthi* and meanings associated with them, Boyce argued that a better way of understanding sexuality is accepting it as “composite and often contradictory”, and that identities are made meaningful through “amalgamations of specific experiences, HIV prevention discourses, and (derivative) anthropological perspectives on [sexual] role and culture” (2007, p. 198). Hence, in this thesis, I do not use any local terminology in ways that essentialise them.

In contrast to such culturally specific terms, many individuals in India identify with Western LGBTQIA+ identities. Reddy’s article (2004) on sexual identity is

seminal as far as it tries to negotiate seemingly conflicting and overlapping sexual identities of “local homosexuality” and “global gayness”. The “gay sexual model” consists of self-identified gay individuals, who see themselves as opposite to the heterosexual population, based on their object of desire (Reddy, 2004). As mentioned before, the growth of these categories of people can be attributed to liberalisation and globalisation of the economy in the early 1990s, (Chatterjee, 2018; Dasgupta & Gokulsing, 2013) which helped create a generation of global Indian citizens. However, classifications based on local-global binary models are fluid, and individuals simultaneously construct themselves within local networks of meanings and global narratives of “gayness”. An interesting example at hand is that of the word ‘gay-*baazi*’, which finds its place in a popular pornographic story, that Katyal argues is a perfect example of the mixing of the Western ‘gay’ and the local *launde-baazi* (an ill habit of boys) (Katyal, 2013). Such instances of intermingling of local and global terms abound in a globalised contemporary India.

The word “queer” is helpful in this context, as it potentially destabilises this local-global taxonomical binary. For example, for Narrain & Bhan, “queer” deconstructs the homo-hetero binary and captures the multitudes of desires and possibilities existing with or without fluid sexual identities (2005, p. 4). Similarly, for Bose and Bhattacharya, the word “queer” describes a broader fluid “*other of sanctioned sexual identity*” in India (Bose & Bhattacharyya, 2007, p. XXI), without having any essentialist undertones. However, queer can sometimes be too broad a term, one that is unable to capture narrower concepts like homoeroticism (see Vanita & Kidwai, 2016). The word “queer” has also been critiqued as being too elite for the Indian context by some studies (see for example, Tellis, 2012). So, perhaps there is no one word that can describe the multitudes of sexual desires, sexual behaviour, and

sexual identities in present-day India. Acknowledging this limitation of language, I found the word “queer” to be the least exclusionary and the most de-essentialist term that has been used in the literature in the Indian context. Hence, in this thesis, I have used the word “queer” to encompass the varied sexualities, desires and behaviours that lie outside the purview of cis-heteronormativity in India. Additionally, queer has been theorised to be a word that is “interactive, yet resistant, claiming at once equality, yet, difference, demanding political representation while insisting on its material and, historical specificity” (De Lauretis, 1991, p. iii). In line with this, Bakshi (2021) has argued that attention to local specificities, including sexual identities, caste, class, access to education, ability, and gender-identity, can de-imperialise the word, by centralising the intersectional subjectivities of queer people. Many scholars in the global South have been working within such decolonial queer traditions (see Chatterjee, 2018; Dasgupta & Dasgupta, 2018; Hawley, 2001). Accordingly, in this thesis, I have used the word “queer”, in a de-essentialist way, paying close attention to the subjective realities of the users of gay dating platforms, without attempting to interpolate their presence with any essentialist gender/sexual identity, unless specified by them.

In addition to the unclear local-global taxonomical divide, the divide between queer and non-queer (hetero) sexualities is also not quite distinct in India. To discuss this, it is essential to examine the contexts in which men have sex with other men in India. Indian society is highly homosocial, and it is socially acceptable for men to display affection through body contact and also share beds with other men (Khan, 1994). This creates opportunities for non-penetrative and penetrative sexual behaviour among men, but these behaviours are seldom seen as “real sex”, and more as *masti* (fun) or play (Asthana & Oostvogels, 2001, p. 712; Khan, 2001) or as

*laundebaazi* (an ill habit of boys) (Katyay, 2013). The behaviours do not arise from the desire of the male body, but from other factors, including “opportunity [in the dark or under the blankets of shared beds in joint family households], access [to men as opposed to “unobtainable” women in sex-segregated Indian societies], cost [of having sex with a man for free, as opposed to hiring a female sex-worker], and a self-absorbed need for sexual discharge” (Khan, 2001, p. 109). Additionally, overcrowded public buses and trains, railway stations, massage parlours or public toilets provide opportunities for “everyday”, intentional, and unintentional homoerotic (and sexual) encounters, which remains hidden from the cisgender heterosexual population (Boyce & Khanna, 2011). This way, queer behaviour is ubiquitous, although it remains hidden from the heteronormative crowd (Boyce & Khanna, 2011, p. 92). This discussion also sheds light on some of the non-digital contexts in which queer sexual behaviour among men takes place in India.

For many Indian men, queer sexual behaviours are distinct from sexual identities. So, the men engaging in queer sexual behaviour seldom identify as homosexual or bisexual (Asthana & Oostvogels, 2001, p. 712). For them, sexuality is an identity, which is different from sexual behaviour (Khan, 2001, p. 112). Chopra, Dasgupta, & Janeja (2000) posited that for most men, there exists a distinction between these “recreational” behaviours for sexual pleasure and their (heterosexual) sexual identity. Hence, Boyce & Khanna (2011) argued against conceptualising a distinct (minority) category of people who partake in homosocial or homoerotic behaviour in the Indian context. They contended that sexualities among Indian men may be “highly labile but simultaneously fixed” (p. 95). So, in many cases, the homo- and hetero-sexualities might be embodied in the same person, though differently than distinctly bisexual identified men. This demonstrates that for many

in India, there is a blurring of the homo/hetero. Again, 'queer' helps encompass in its ambit people whose identities are labile, as well as those whose identities are fixed.

Queer digital forums like gay dating platforms or gay chat rooms bring together these varied groups of people and more: people identifying with local as well as global identities; both situationally/conveniently/libidinally motivated, as well as those motivated by their desire for men. Tellis (2007) provided a clear illustration of this. Through a participant-observer ethnographical study of a "gay male chat room" in India, Tellis identified three major categories of men who inhabit gay chat rooms: "the homosexual heterosexual", who are men who indulge in sexual behaviour with other men (but do not desire men); "the married man", who is married to a woman but desires men (in secret); and "the liminal adolescent", who may toy with alternative sexual identities or desires, but in addition to (and not as a substitute) to compulsory heterosexuality of Indian society (2007, pp. 366–370). Although it is not possible to chart definitive or exhaustive categories of men based on sexual identity and behaviour through small ethnographic studies, they provide valuable insights to demonstrate how the internet enables sexual (and non-sexual) interactions among a heterogeneous group of people with diverse sexual identities and varied sexual expectations.

It is noteworthy that Tellis' ethnographic study of men in a chat room consisted of a specific class of people, who could afford a computer and internet in 2001. During the last two decades, cheaper internet connections and cheaper smartphones with vernacular user interface, and government initiatives like "Digital India" (Government of India, n.d.), have brought the internet within reach of a lot more people, irrespective of their economic background or English-speaking proficiency. Although having high-speed internet connection still requires money and hence, a

certain class privilege (Nagar, 2018), a recent report has predicted that as of 2020, 622 million people in India are active internet users, a number that will rise to 900+ million by 2025 (Internet and Mobile Association of India & Kantar, 2021). So, gay dating platforms, which have come into being relatively recently, have brought together an even more varied group of people with different motivations and socio-economic backgrounds. In the next section, I provide an overview of the various digital queer spaces in India.

### **1.1.2 Digital queer spaces in India**

Digital queer spaces can be of various forms. There are online spaces which are generic, which have been co-opted by the queer community as spaces of interaction. A poignant example is that of closed/secret Facebook communities. These queer spaces are about “identifying new possibilities out of existing space” (Dasgupta, 2017) as opposed to claiming new spaces. On the other hand, there are online spaces that are exclusively queer, including mailing lists, dating and networking platforms. Queer blogs are another example of such a space, which acts as a tool for both community creation and self-writing (Mitra, 2010).

One of the earliest well-known digital media used by queer people in India was the *khush* mailing list, which was used “to discuss South Asian gay culture/experiences/issues, as well as a form a social and support network” (The ‘khush’ Mailing List Administration, n.d.). Other similar lists like “SAGrrls” and “desidykes” were soon formed catering to the South Asian queer population (Dasgupta, 2017). It is noteworthy that many of these groups were made, hosted and managed by the South Asian diaspora. The reason for this is that internet access came earlier to the Indian queer diaspora than the queer population living in India. Gay Bombay was the first Indian (as opposed to South Asian or diasporic) discussion

group and party organiser for queer Indians (Dasgupta, 2017). Gay Bombay was catering to the city's queer population by providing them with a safe, non-sexual and anonymous environment. One of the reasons for the emergence of Gay Bombay was the colonial promotion of English as a language, which had produced a generation of English speaking, upper middle-class gay men, who were tech-savvy and ready to exploit the internet to their benefit. This coincided with the rise of the gay rights movement in India. It is hard to say if activism informed digital queer spaces (Shahani, 2008), or if digital queer spaces propelled activism (Dasgupta, 2017).

Digital spaces created opportunities for queer people to form intimacies. Platforms like gay dating platforms or social media allow people to form connections, romantic intimacy, friendship and sexual relations (Dasgupta, 2017; Dasgupta & Dasgupta, 2018). Dasgupta conceptualised these as queer people forging “virtual intimacies”: one consisting of real emotions and compassion (Dasgupta, 2017, p. 67). The internet allows queer people to express their queerness in relative safety and form bonds across geographical barriers: from villages to districts to cities (Mitra & Gajjala, 2008). Highlighting this affordance of the internet, Mitra and Gajjala (2008, p. 415) stated that the internet allows queer Indians to make themselves visible while avoiding immediate physical violence. However, it is important to acknowledge that discrimination/exclusion exists in queer digital spaces too.

However, the internet is also used by marginalised queer people and organisations in creative ways to protest, organise and share resources. Moitra et al. (2021) reported that digital platforms allow many underrepresented queer populations to create a safe space and share resources relevant to their experiences. Such digital forums include “Queer Muslim Project” (a Facebook page catering to

queer Muslims in South Asia), “Chinki Homo Project” (a blog acting as a “digital queer anthology” of the experiences of North-Eastern India) and “@dalitqueerproject” (an Instagram page which claims to be “breaking hetero norms & caste shackles one post at a time”). Digital technology has also been used by community-based organisations for activism, resource-sharing and mobilising communities (Moitra et al., 2021). So, overall, digital queer India has created spaces that provide opportunities for self-expression and community-formation for many. I now move on to explain the pertinent socio-legal background of India.

### **1.1.3 Socio-legal background of queer India**

In India, “carnal intercourse against the course of nature” was criminalised in section 377 of the *Indian Penal Code, 1860*, infamously known as the “sodomy legislation” of India. Drafted by Lord Macaulay in 1860, this legislation was a colonial era law that India retained for a long time. The Delhi High Court had read down this provision in 2019, before being reinstated by the Supreme Court in 2013 in an appeal petition. Eventually, in response to a curative petition against this judgment, the Supreme Court read down the provision as unconstitutional in *Navtej Singh Johar & Ors v. Union of India thr. Secretary Ministry of Law* in 2018. In this judgement, a five judge Constitutional Bench read down the provision, in so far as the sex was consensual and in private. In arriving at the said conclusion, the court depended on the “right to privacy” and “right to love”, which they read to be an integral part of the constitutionally enshrined fundamental right to life and livelihood. Moreover, they also depended on the Yogyakarta principles of international law which mandated protection and non-discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation. Justice Nariman also alluded to the *Mental*



*Healthcare Act, 2017* to pronounce that minority sexual orientations are normal and natural (*Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India, 2018*).

Although section 377 of the *Indian Penal Code, 1860* has been mostly touted as the “anti-gay” law of India, technically it did not criminalise a particular gender or sexual orientation. The legal provision was gender- and sexuality-neutral in its language. It sought to punish “carnal intercourse against the course of nature” (non-peno-vaginal sex) with 10 years imprisonment, regardless of who engages in it (Mandal, 2018). Nevertheless, it has impacted queer people more than cisgender heterosexual populations. In the judgment, Justice Chandrachud acknowledged that although the law is neutral in its language, it affects queer people’s identities, sense of dignity and the right to sexual relationship more than the non-queer population; thus, reading the law as facilitating indirect discrimination (*Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India, 2018*). Even among the queer population, disenfranchised people (including transgender people, “effeminate” gay men, and hijras) were largely impacted by the law, as they are more *visible* in public. Using the law as an excuse, the police routinely harassed, threatened, and extorted money from these marginalised groups of people (see Mandal, 2018; PUCL-Karnataka, 2001). In addition to section 377, other laws seeking to prevent public nuisance, solicitation of sex and public indecency (see Mandal, 2018) were also routinely used by the police to harass queer people.

It is important to mention that the judgment has its fair share of criticism, as it did not reflect the interests of everyone under the queer umbrella. For instance, although the court read down section 377, it was read down in so far as the sex act is “in private”. Hence, the judgement has been critiqued as being elite, as not empathetic to the living conditions of people in India who do not have access to

private spaces (Kumar, 2020; see also Dave, 2012; Sircar & Jain, 2012 who make this argument in the context of the 2013 Delhi High Court judgment, which had also put forth a similar reasoning). This is especially important to consider as many working-class sex workers, including transgender women and hijras, do not have the luxury of a private space (Kumar, 2020). Moreover, in the Indian context, where people mostly live with parents and families, unless there is a pressing reason not to, access to a private place to cohabit with a queer partner is difficult. While thinking of the legal recognition of queer rights in India, it is important to acknowledge this differential treatment of queer people in Indian society.

Before the *Navtej Singh* judgment, the Supreme Court of India had passed another landmark judgment upholding transgender people's right to self-determination, without having to undergo any gender affirmative surgeries or hormone treatments. Popularly known as the "National Legal Services Authority [NALSA] judgment", it recognised a "third gender" outside the gender binary as a legitimate gender identity and directed the state and Central governments to promote the welfare of transgender people (whether identifying as a transgender man, a transgender woman or with a third gender). The judgment also directed the State to create "reservation" for transgender people, in line with the principle of affirmative action enshrined in the Constitution. However, the implementation of the directives of the Supreme Court judgment has been far from perfect. Although it has worked towards reducing discrimination and improving access to cis-heteropatriarchal spaces for transgender people, the *Transgender Person's Act, 2019*, enacted in pursuance of this judgment, has many limitations (Bhattacharya et al., 2022). It does not have clear provisions guaranteeing reservations for transgender people (Bhattacharya et al., 2022; Sriraam, 2022). It also requires transgender people to be certified as

“transgender” by a Board, consisting of doctors and a district magistrate (Sriraam, 2022). This requirement goes against the very principle of self-determination that was at the heart of the NALSA judgment. Similarly, there are no clear provisions and recognition of intersex persons in the Act (Sriraam, 2022). So, although the judiciary recognised transgender people and provided progressive directives to the government, the implementation of those directives the State has not been satisfactory. This suggests a clear lack of understanding or empathy on the part of the State when it comes to queer rights.

The above discussion highlighted the legal status of queer rights in India. I now turn to briefly explain the social realities of queer people in contemporary India. Despite the law’s recognition, and uneven implementation of the court’s directives by the State mentioned above, the attitudinal shift in society is fragmented and slow. Marginalisation and social exclusion based on one’s sexual or gender identity continue in different parts of the country and affect different aspects of a queer person’s life. A recent report (International Commission of Jurists, 2019) has outlined a number of issues that queer people face in India. They include discrimination in the context of housing, secure tenancy, forced eviction, discrimination at workplace and educational institutions, and access to public spaces, including streets, public transport, public toilets and cultural places and events (International Commission of Jurists, 2019). Violence from family is also a common occurrence for queer people. Queer couples are repeatedly harassed by their families, neighbours, and relatives because of their decision to live in a queer relationship. In such cases, the police generally have not been very helpful, and many queer couples had to go to court to enforce their “right to love” and live with a partner of their choice (see for example, Dhar, 2020; Lobo, 2021; Press Trust of India, 2022).

Additionally, many queer people are made to go through conversion therapies by their families (see Majumder & Kar, 2021; Tenneti, 2022). Bullying of queer individuals in educational institutions at both primary and secondary school levels has also been reported in contemporary India (Menon-C et al., 2019). This discussion provides a brief snapshot of discrimination and injustice against queer people in contemporary India.

## **1.2 TERMINOLOGY**

Throughout this thesis, I have used the term “gay dating platforms” to denote platforms that primarily cater to men seeking men, although it is important to acknowledge that not all users on the platforms are gay-identifying. The platform users consist of men of a variety of sexual orientations, including transgender women, non-binary people, and heterosexual men (see Rhoton et al., 2016). However, many of these platforms are marketed as “gay” and have fields, like, “position” or “tribes”, which cater to popular gay tropes more than anything else (see Sinha-Roy & Ball, 2022, p. 51). Gay dating platforms are variedly referred to in the literature as gay male social networking applications (Gudelunas, 2012; Tziallas, 2015) and sometimes also as gay hookup apps (Ahlm, 2017). This project seeks to be inclusive of both mobile applications and web-based dating platforms; hence, I have used “platforms” in a broader sense to include both of these types of spaces. I use the phrase “victimisation experiences” in this thesis to describe a variety of abusive practices that are either facilitated by or initiated on these platforms. This includes both crimes and abusive behaviour that do not qualify as crimes (body-shaming, for example). The use of such terminology is driven by the experiences of participants themselves.

### 1.3 RESEARCH PROBLEM AND GAP

Despite the existence and impact of gay dating platform-related victimisation as evidenced in media reports and community-based forums and discussions mentioned before, there is limited empirical evidence about these issues in India, marking a gap in the literature. Two studies based in India have highlighted the issue. One study with MSM (men who have sex with men), transgender women and hijras in Mumbai has outlined that sexual partners met online often perpetrate a range of victimisation, including theft, physical assault, forced sex, extortion, blackmail and asking for money after sex through deception (Li et al., 2017). This study, however, was conducted at a time when gay sex was illegal, hence, perpetrators had a greater vulnerability to exploit: the criminality of queer sexual activity itself. It is important that the scenario is re-examined post 2018, when gay sex is no longer a crime in India. Some studies based in the West (Choi et al., 2018; Fansher & Randa, 2017; Lauckner et al., 2019) have also dealt with gay dating platform-related victimisation, which I discuss in more depth in the literature review (Chapter 2). However, the need for a study is clear in the Indian context, given the unique socio-legal setting of India.

In addition to the abovementioned studies that report on diverse forms of victimisation through gay dating platforms, some research has reported specifically on discriminatory practices on gay dating platforms in India. Such studies demonstrated the prevalence of classism (DasGupta, 2019; see also Nagar, 2018), casteism (Ponniah & Tamalapakula, 2020) and prejudice against “effeminate subject positions (effeminophobia)” (Dasgupta, 2017, p. 95) on gay dating platforms in India. These studies have mostly focussed on digital cultures, intimacies, and instances of exclusion there. Another study based in Mumbai reported on the risks of “visibility” on gay dating platforms: information security, identification by others,

and the possibility of blackmail (Birnholtz et al., 2020), which is another form of victimisation. This thesis goes beyond these specific forms of victimisation and builds evidence on a variety of victimisation related to gay dating platforms in India. Additionally, in the current project, I examine all aspects of gay dating platform-related victimisation: the context in which it takes place, its impacts, people's response to such victimisation, and the barriers that people face during help-seeking.

In addition to limited empirical evidence, another issue with gay dating platform related victimisation relates to popular safe-dating advice. Dating platforms themselves, in India (see Singh, 2018) and around the world, have acknowledged the risks related to gay dating platforms and have provided safety advice on their webpages (see Grindr, n.d.-c; Grindr, n.d.-d). Much of this advice relies greatly on responsabilising users for their own safety. Phrases like “keep your eyes open and stay safe” (Romeo, n.d.-c), “don't rush into things” (Grindr, n.d.-c), “don't let anyone body-shame you” (Grindr, n.d.-c) and “never share indecent/nude pictures & your number before meeting” (Blued India, n.d.) are some examples of safety advice that deflect the responsibility for safety onto the users. While important in raising awareness on the crimes and harms related to gay dating platforms, these strategies focus heavily on users' actions (or inactions) in making gay dating platform-related interactions safe. This notion, that users' actions or inactions are the primary agents that can prevent victimisation, can lead to *victim-blaming* and self-blame in the event of victimisation (see Cross et al., 2016, p. 12). Moreover, despite such popular safe dating advice relating to gay dating platforms, people continue to face victimisation on or facilitated by these platforms. Hence, in this project, I shift the discourse of responsibility for safety from humans (victims/survivors or perpetrators) by

investigating the roles played by technological, socio-political and institutional factors in such victimisation.

#### **1.4 RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS**

The central aim of this thesis is to further our understanding of the victimisation experiences of people using gay dating platforms in India. In this exploratory study, I focus on all forms of victimisation related to gay dating platforms across India, and the contexts in which they take place. While explaining the context, I also highlight the specific roles played by gay dating platforms themselves and structural factors, like queerphobia and sex negativity, in such victimisation. Additionally, I explore how the victimisation impacts people, how people respond to such victimisation, and the barriers they face in seeking help and redress. Lastly, I highlight the demands and aspirations of gay dating platform users of a safer dating experience. As such, this thesis answers the following research questions:

- RQ1. What forms of victimisation are experienced by the users of gay dating platforms in India, in what contexts do they occur, and what factors play a role in such victimisation?
- RQ2. What are the consequences and impacts of gay dating platform-related victimisation?
- RQ3. How do the users of gay dating platforms respond to victimisation and what challenges do they face when doing so?
- RQ4. How can gay dating platform-related victimisation be prevented or addressed?

In answering these research questions, I draw upon the victimisation experiences of 14 people who have faced harms and crimes related to a gay dating platform in India and insights from 3 support workers who have been handling such

“crisis cases”. I collected this data by conducting semi-structured qualitative interviews with these research participants over WhatsApp calls and telephone. I build upon their stories and insights to document the variety of gay dating platform-related victimisation in India. As mentioned previously, these stories contain abusive behaviour that qualifies as crimes and other behaviour that are not crimes or civil offences but were articulated by participants as victimisation. I document all such experiences as victimisation because that was how participants experienced and articulated them (for more on the limits of legally recognised offences, see Henry & Powell, 2016; Powell & Henry, 2018). In doing so, I move away from a narrow and strict definition of offences, as codified by the law, and highlight the feelings and experiences of the research participants, as is the norm in qualitative research (Mason, 2002).

In this project, I systematically discuss a number of victimisation types linked to gay dating platforms. This raises awareness of the victimisation types that may occur through gay dating platforms and fills an empirical gap in the literature in the Indian context. Furthermore, by illustrating the roles played by the technology and by socio-political factors in making victimisation possible in this context, I provide empirical evidence against holding the users responsible for their own victimisation. I also show that irrespective of following all measures commonly advertised as safe-dating advice, victimisation may still happen. Hence, I recommend more structural changes in society and design-based changes in platforms that can prevent victimisation more effectively. In highlighting the prejudice and stigma that users of gay dating platforms face in seeking redressal after facing crimes, I also recommend a community policing initiative that can help make redressal more accessible to all. Lastly, I amplify the voices of the research participants in advocating for broader



social change, which will positively impact formal and informal avenues of support for queer people experiencing victimisation in India.

## **1.5 THEORETICAL CONTEXT**

This project works within and develops the emerging fields of Queer Criminology, Digital Criminology and Sex-Positive Criminology. In this section, I explain the relevance of these three theories for this project. All three theories inform the design, analysis and the recommendations arising out of the project. Queer Criminology, as a discipline, revolves around highlighting and drawing attention towards the stigmatisation, criminalisation and rejection of the queer community (Buist & Lenning, 2016). Admittedly, there are limited studies that focus on crimes against queer populations, owing to the homosexual deviancy thesis (Woods, 2015). The homosexual deviancy thesis claims that most criminological schools historically dealt with LGBTQ+ people as sexual deviants, until after the 1970s when queer people largely (except for a few key exceptions) disappeared from the criminological discourse (Woods, 2015). The cumulative effect of this phenomenon is that we have a very limited understanding of how sexual orientation and/or gender identity shape crimes and victimisation (Woods, 2014). So, Queer Criminology, as a discipline and as a method, pushes the boundaries of the foundational heteronormativity of criminology (Ball, 2014a). This project seeks to further this objective by investigating the factors that lead to victimisation of the users of gay dating platforms and the challenges that they face in seeking help.

Second, this project builds upon the concept of digital society, where technology is deeply embedded into our lives and society (Stratton et al., 2017). I use this approach to conceptualise gay dating platform-related victimisation as “network activities”, experienced across online and offline environments. This allows me to

steer clear from the binary conceptualisation of offending as either “cybercrime” or “real-world” crime. Furthermore, in describing these incidents, I also emphasise the role of the gay dating platforms in the victimisation. I do this by analysing the data using the analytical tools offered by Actor-Network Theory (ANT). ANT posits a posthuman understanding of the world, where all meaning-making is possible by the interactions of both human and non-human actors (actants). As such, agency is not solely the property of humans, but of the assemblages, consisting of both human and non-human entities (see Bijker & Law, 1994; Callon, 2017; Latour, 2012; Law, 2009). I also use the ANT framework to illustrate the role of socio-political factors of societal queerphobia and sex-negativity in some of the forms of victimisation; and of disgust in responding to and seeking help after victimisation.

Finally, I use Sex-Positive Criminology (Wodda & Panfil, 2018) to inform the recommendations arising out of the project. Sex-Positive Criminology argues for an “explicit focus on structures and institutions that oppress sexuality and persecute, stigmatize...people engaged in the political act of wanting” (Wodda & Panfil, 2020, p. 11). Hence, in this project, I offer recommendations that do not depend on the self-regulation of the users and show that such recommendations can sometimes do more harm than good. Instead, I focus on structural changes that can prevent gay dating platform-related victimisation and that can better support people who have faced victimisation in these contexts. I now move on to outline the structure of the thesis.

## **1.6 THESIS STRUCTURE**

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. In the next chapter, I examine the general literature on gay dating platforms, focussing mainly on the culture, uses and features. I draw upon these to explain the context of the victimisation in the subsequent chapters. I then explain the theoretical approaches frameworks of Queer

Criminology, Sex-Positive Criminology and Digital Criminology and the analytical framework of Actor-Network Theory that underpin this thesis. I then thematically present the literature on some key types of victimisation, not specific to gay dating platforms. I then review the extant literature on gay dating platform-related risks and victimisation, and demonstrate a gap in such literature in an Indian context. Finally, I review the available literature on the barriers that queer people face in reporting hate crimes to the police. I draw connections from this body of literature to the barriers that users of gay dating platforms face in reporting the incidents to the police. Throughout, I highlight the gap in specific literature based in India on gay dating platform-related crimes and harms.

In the third chapter, I present the methodology I employed to collect data in the thesis. I explain the rationale behind the qualitative design of the project and using semi-structured interviews to collect data. I discuss the recruitment methods and the issues with conducting interviews remotely owing to COVID-19 related border closures. I discuss the ethical issues arising out of the project, and how I mitigated the potential risks. Then I discuss Thematic Analysis and ANT analysis, and how I have used them to analyse the interview data. I conclude the chapter by outlining some limitations of the project.

The fourth chapter is the first of the three analysis chapters of this thesis. In it, I begin to answer the research question: (RQ1) What forms of victimisation are experienced by the users of gay dating platforms in India, in what contexts do they occur, and what factors play a role in such victimisation?; In this chapter I report on those forms of victimisation that people experienced before meeting other users in-person: exclusionary and discriminatory practices, violation of privacy, blackmail, romance fraud and catfishing. I also use the analytical tools offered by Actor-

Network Theory to highlight the unique roles played by the interactions between gay dating platforms and platform users in causing and sustaining the victimisation. I use this analytical framework to illustrate how gay dating platform-related victimisation is made possible by a heterogenous assemblage of human and non-human actors which occurs in a hybrid (online/offline) environment.

The fifth chapter continues answering the same research question, RQ1, as those answered by the fourth chapter. In this chapter, I thematically present the forms of victimisation that users experienced after meeting someone in-person via a gay dating platform. However, many of these forms of victimisation too, like image-based sexual abuse, transpire in a hybrid (online-offline) environment. Specifically, I discuss the following forms of victimisation: extortion; abduction; violation of private space; friends-with benefits fraud; image-based sexual abuse; and unwanted sex. Overall, I elucidate how perpetrators use coercion, deception, force, and manipulation to carry out various types of victimisation. I further use the analytical tools of Actor Network Theory to illustrate the role of hidden structural factors like queerphobia or sex negativity that makes the victimisation possible. In the broadest sense, Chapters 4 and 5 thematically enumerate the various forms of victimisation that people experience (during or after) using gay dating platforms in India. This builds evidence of these forms of victimisation and highlights the contexts and situations in which they take place.

In the sixth chapter, I answer the second and third research questions: (RQ2) What are the consequences and impacts of gay dating platform-related victimisation?; and (RQ3) How do the users of gay dating platforms respond to victimisation and what challenges do they face in doing so? In answering the research questions, I draw attention to the short- and long-term consequences of gay

dating platform-related victimisation on users. Next, in answering the final research question, I trace the responses of people who have faced victimisation related to a gay dating platform. In it, I highlight the private solutions and measures that participants took to remedy the harm done, and to feel safer in the future. I also discuss participants' efforts at seeking help after experiencing victimisation and the challenges they faced in doing so. The central focus of this part of the chapter is to highlight the structural and institutional barriers in accessing support and redressal after experiencing victimisation, which I do using ANT.

These barriers form the foundation of the recommendations chapter (Chapter 7), where I answer the fourth research question (RQ4) How can gay dating platform-related victimisation be prevented or addressed? In this chapter, I amplify the hopes and demands of the participants in offering recommendations to prevent gay dating platform-related victimisation as much as possible, and to cater to the support needs of people who experience them. I draw on the ANT analysis in the previous chapters to recommend steps that dating platforms can take to mitigate the risk of crimes and harms. Additionally, I recommend ensuring the police force are sensitised to queer issues, and ways of living that would increase empathy and reduce victim-blaming when users are reporting experiences of crime victimisation. To achieve this efficiently, I recommend a community policing initiative at state levels to handle complaints by queer people (in general), which also includes a specialised team focused on gay dating platform-related crime. Similar such initiatives currently in Mumbai for policing 65 slums (Roy et al., 2004), Kerala for delivering police services more efficiently (Kumar, 2012) and in some states under the aegis of Transgender protection cells (Humsafar Trust et al., 2021). I further recommend publicising such services and helpline numbers so that people facing victimisation

can reach out and be connected to the right support service efficiently and quickly. Finally, I highlight the need for comprehensive sexuality education in schools and colleges to reduce the stigma for diverse genders and sexualities and increase sex-positivity in society.

In the concluding chapter (Chapter 8) of the thesis, I synthesise the key findings from the thesis that evidences the victimisation experiences of people related to gay dating platforms. I further explain the theoretical and empirical contributions of this research and chart out some directions that future research in this field can take. I end the thesis with some personal reflections on this research.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

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In this chapter, I firstly provide a brief overview of the literature on gay dating platforms. While presenting the major themes within this body of literature, I explain how gay dating platforms work, why people use them and what their features are. Through this, I set the stage for the present exploratory study on gay dating platform-related victimisation. I then provide a broad overview of the theoretical approach I take in this thesis. In this, I explain the theoretical fields of Digital Criminology, Actor-Network Theory, Queer Criminology and Sex-Positive Criminology and how they inform my study.

Next, I discuss the general available literature (not specific to dating platforms) on some forms of victimisation that feature heavily in the media-reports on gay dating platform-related victimisation: image-based sexual abuse; romance frauds; crimes in hookup scenarios; and queerphobic hate crimes. I draw from and build upon these bodies of literature in my thesis, as I explain these forms of victimisation in the context of gay dating platforms in India.

I then move to examining the literature that specifically deals with gay dating platform-related crimes and harms. Under this, I thematically organise the available literature into those that focus on discrimination, exclusion, and harassment; privacy issues and data security; risky sexual practices; and dating platform-facilitated sexual and violent crimes. Finally, I look at the available literature dealing with the barriers that queer people face in reporting crimes. While examining these bodies of literature, I establish a clear gap in such literature in the Indian context.

## 2.1 GAY DATING PLATFORMS

Gay dating platforms are variedly referred to in the literature as gay male social networking applications (GMSNAs) (Gudelunas, 2012; Tziallas, 2015) and sometimes, also as gay hookup apps (Ahlm, 2017). There is an array of literature around the uses of gay dating platforms. There are at least four slightly overlapping categories within the literature in this area: ethnographies of the platforms (exploring the nature or culture of the dating platforms); studies on user motivations and goals for being on these platforms; studies exploring the effects of these platforms on users; and studies of the risks and the negotiation of safety on these platforms. I briefly discuss each of these themes below.

### 2.1.1 Ethnography of gay dating platforms

#### *Culture*

Many studies have focussed on the culture and practices on gay dating platforms. One recurrent theme which emerges from such literature is that of consumerism, and how these platforms encourage “consumer-like” behaviour among users, including the commodification of other users. Bauman claimed that gay dating platforms run on the logics of efficiency, attractiveness, variety, practicality, instantaneity, and disposability (2003). Similarly, Cassidy, writing about gay men’s use of social media, mentioned how the commodification of gay men is written in the very “existence of a digital infrastructure that organised user profiles around penis size, sexual fetishes and the like” (2018, p. 53). Light, Fletcher and Adam (2008) explained this phenomenon by stating how profiles on dating platforms like Gaydar<sup>4</sup> reinforce stereotypes by boxing users into specific categories, contributing to “an increasingly globalised, commercialised and monolithic form of gay male sexuality”

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<sup>4</sup> GayDar is a website and app-based dating platform catering mostly towards gay and bisexual men.



(p. 300). In other words, dating platform interfaces reduce users to commodified data consisting of a few pictures, body measurements, and a couple of words (Conner, 2018, p. 6). Jaspal's qualitative study reiterated this fact, where the respondents (gay men) spoke about this "consumptive culture" of Grindr (2017). Dean (2009) stated that such culture leads to an environment devoid of social bonds or constitutive knowledge, driven only by specific desires, kinks or fetishes.

However, not all studies see commodification in a negative light. Goldberg, for example, offered a contrasting viewpoint. Goldberg argued that playing into the commodification of users on gay dating platforms is entirely voluntary; users can choose to "play along—in pursuit of desires and pleasures of [their] own—or to decline and look elsewhere" (2018, p. 14; see also Race, 2015). Goldberg called this affordance "politically useful", as it is untainted by moral constraints. Indeed, gay dating platforms provide a space for many to have uninhibited techno-social or techno-sexual interactions without having to physically go to a (gay) venue. It is also important to acknowledge that this commodification of the self and others existed even before online dating platforms existed, although in different forms, like textual dating advertisements in newspapers (see Coupland, 1996). The above discussion provides an important backdrop for many of the forms of victimisation that take place. I discuss these forms of victimisation separately further below.

The second recurrent theme in the literature on the ethnography on gay dating platforms is about sexually attractive self-presentation. This theme revolves around how humans are technologically transformed into objects of desire through the use of sexually attractive images: the "pornographic remediation of the gay male body" (Mowlabocus, 2010, p. 58), for interactional success. This is perhaps because gay (and indeed any other) digital dating platforms are often visually driven, and the

primary interface of the platforms is a grid of images of other users (see Goldberg, 2018). Hence, a sexually attractive self-representation is crucial for interactional success.

Sexually attractive images on user profiles reflect the “narcissistic gaze of the subject” as well as “the voyeuristic gaze of the other” (Mowlabocus, 2010, p. 94). Phillips argued that sending (intimate or otherwise) images can also be seen as a gift to other users, which are shared incrementally as chats progress, and have an expectation of reciprocity, bringing into being something that they called the “gift economy” on these platforms (2015, p. 77). Dating platform interfaces have also been described as illustrative of the “co-constitutive relation of desire and app technology...[.] a ‘pornotopian’ vision of collective sexual life by self-design” (Davis et al., 2016, p. 844). Reiterating this line of thought, Tziallas (2015) drew a comparison between gaming and dating platforms by describing the latter as “do-it-yourself (DIY) amateur porn platforms” (Tziallas, 2015, p. 761). This viewpoint is further validated in Phillips’ (2015) anthropological study of Grindr. Phillips posited that users strategically using self-made pornographic images, viz. “the naked selfies” cropped under the shoulders as a means of holding and shaping required modes of communication (p. 72), while tacitly maintaining anonymity. These findings from this body of literature inform the analysis presented in Chapter 4, where I examine the role played by this culture and nude imagery within it in making users vulnerable to “outing”<sup>5</sup> or blackmail.

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Outing’ refers to the non-consensual disclosure of someone’s queer identity to the public or to specific people.

## *Features*

Many studies have been devoted to some specific features of gay dating platforms, and their implications. Although none of the studies reviewed here focuses exclusively on how perpetrators and/or victims/survivors use app features for victimisation, a discussion of the literature will help in picturing the possibilities of these platforms, and potential that exists for both offending and minimising the risks or impact of the victimisation.

The first feature which comes up in most of the literature on this area is that of “filters”. Most dating applications offer a “filter” feature, which allows users to filter out certain users from their app interface, based on age, body measurements, race, and user goal/expectation. Sam Chan found from a qualitative study that age and distance were the most commonly used filters (2018, p. 2575). Sam Chan concluded that the filters are used as a sort of arbitrary line to manage the unlimited pool of users that are available on the platform. However, Sam Chan also rightly observed that the filter feature filters out people from being potential lovers, friends, or hookups, even before they get a chance to speak (on chat) (p. 2755). This observation was reiterated by Conner (2018, p. 8) who posited that the filter feature reifies user prejudices by allowing users to discriminate and exclude others who do not fit certain criteria (a hypermasculine image, for example), and renders some users invisible on these platforms (see also Clay, 2018). Filters can potentially act as tools for victims/survivors to avoid stereotypically problematic profiles (like ones without face pictures). Contrastingly, filters might also be used by perpetrators to exclude or target a particular group of users, on the basis of race, ethnicity, body-type or serostatus (HIV status). In recent times, Grindr has removed its ethnicity filter

(Mowlabocus, 2021), acknowledging that the feature was used extensively as a tool for excluding people of certain races on Grindr.

Another feature which has been discussed at some length in a few works is that of “blocking”. Tziallas (2015), while explaining that dating platforms apply gaming logic to socio-sexual interaction, described getting blocked as “losing” the game. However, it has also been described as a strategy for dealing with discovery by family/friends/colleagues using the same platforms, to avoid outing and/or being deemed promiscuous (Albury & Byron, 2016, p. 4; Blackwell et al., 2015, pp. 1130, 1132; Sam Chan, 2017, p. 633). The blocking function has also been described in some studies as a tool that is used to avoid seeing someone again whom they have already had sex with once (Mcguire, 2018, p. 378). Blocking has further been described by some users as a means of reducing obligations and responsibilities (Davis et al., 2016). One participant in Davis et al.’s study described blocking by saying “it’s a beautiful thing, it can’t come back and haunt you” (p. 843). Davis et al. observe that blocking is used by many users as a way of constructing a community of attractive users, consisting solely of the ones they find attractive (p. 844), bringing into being the “pornotopia” mentioned earlier, which can lead to excluding people based on physical or racial attributes. The block function can also serve as a useful tool for both potential and actual victims/survivors. It can be used to block profiles displaying suspicious behaviour, and to shut out a former perpetrator to help cope with victimisation.

Many studies have also considered the chat feature and the interactions that take place through chats on these platforms. Speaking in the context of Grindr, Licoppe, Rivière, & Morel (2017), for example, stated that chats on gay dating platforms generally follow a script and are markedly different from an ordinary

conversation. They identified three distinct sequential features of a typical conversation through chats on Grindr: “multimodality”, using a combination of text, pictures and maps; “a checklist orientation”, a few common criteria (like sexual kinks and fetishes, location, etc.) facilitating “matching”, which is crucial for the users, and; “reciprocity”, a specific chat message requiring a specific response (for example, an expectation of receiving intimate images from a person with whom a user has shared their own intimate images). They went on to argue that the chats are predominantly goal-oriented. So, when the goal is a sexual encounter, the chats predominantly revolve around establishing proximity, sexual compatibility, and the availability of a private place for sexual encounter, while disclosing limited or no self-identifying details. The chat feature can work as a direct site for victimisation where users receive harassing or violent texts (see Carlson, 2020; Dietzel, 2021a), or it can be used to facilitate victimisation like blackmail or IBSA. I refer to the features examined in this short review throughout the thesis to illustrate the experiences of gay dating platform-related victimisation.

### **2.1.2 User motivations for being on gay dating platforms, and impacts of gay dating platforms**

The dominant public perception about most gay dating platforms is that they primarily cater to users looking for partners for casual sex or hooking up. This is evidenced through both interviews and focus group discussion with users in the US and France (Ahlm, 2017, p. 368; Licoppe et al., 2016; Sam Chan, 2018, p. 2572; Taylor et al., 2017, p. 6653), as well as popular culture discourses around such platforms, including those in India (see for example Duffy, 2019; Grindr, 2019; Singh, 2018; Smith, 2019a, 2019b). For instance, Licoppe, Rivière and Morel (2016), undertook a study of twenty-three male Grindr users in France, and stated that Grindr is used to provide a “distinctive type of social encounter, a quick sexual encounter

between strangers based on location awareness” (2016, p. 2555). This holds true for India as well (see Dasgupta, 2018, p. 196, Bhattacharya, 2018). So, it can be assumed that these platforms facilitate what has been termed by Mowlabocus (2010) as “digital cruising”.

Many studies have, however, shown that this assumption is not entirely accurate and have identified multiple goals and objectives among users. For example, Blackwell, Birnholtz and Abbott (2015) stated how the platforms are used for immediate sexual encounters, dates, as well as just chatting. Similarly, Corriero and Tong (2016) divided user motivations into three broad categories: romantic or long-term relation seeking; social or friends seeking; and sexual. Additionally, “killing time” has also featured as a strong motivation among users (Rice et al., 2012). In an exploratory study of users, Gudelunas (2012) concluded that there was considerable overlap between sexual, romantic and platonic motivations of the users of various social networking sites, including dating platforms. Gudelunas also found that gay-specific dating platforms help users collect both social as well as sexual contacts. While the platforms are sometimes used for meeting new people in a city, at other times, they are used to find sexual partners compatible with one’s kinks and desires (2012, p. 362). One of the main reasons that queer people use online dating platforms is their apparent isolation from society (Narin, 2018). Other reasons can include difficulty in identifying queer people in society, fear of rejection, and the possibility of a homophobic backlash (Fox, 2014). Many scholars have argued that gay dating platforms like Grindr have allowed gay men to meet each other outside of conventional gay venues like gay bars, and hence, have freed them from the locational confines of these venues (Blackwell et al., 2015; Brubaker et al., 2016). Such platforms are a means to an end (a monogamous relationship, for example) to

some (see Brubaker, Ananny, & Crawford, 2016); while to others, they are a source of entertainment (see Tziallas, 2015).

Some studies have suggested that the goals and motivations of gay dating platform users are not static. Sam Chan (2018) observed that the multiple goals and motivations of users are ambiguous, fluid and temporally inconsistent. They argue that users want to maximise the potential of dating platforms, so, they are “open to” a far greater number of possibilities than the specific goals mentioned on their profiles. Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz (2018) reiterated this observation by stating that users maintain a degree of uncertainty when it comes to stating their goals on these platforms. The users incrementally divulge information through private chats and adaptively respond to information received from other users to maximise the potential of interactions (Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz, 2018, p. 2482). Hence, it can be safely concluded that although the dominant perception of gay dating platforms is that they are used for sex, they are in-fact used for a variety of purposes.

In many studies, attention has also been paid to the effects of gay dating platforms on their users. Taylor et al., for example, found that intimate self-disclosure on Grindr resulted in decreased levels of loneliness and internalised homophobia (2017). In other words, Grindr helps its users feel more comfortable with their sexuality. By way of contrast, they also found that sexting did not lead to such levels of decreased internalised homophobia, as sexting follows normative scripts, and does not involve sharing of deeply personal and intimate feelings (p. 2253). Another study highlighted the temporality of relationships formed through these dating platforms and argued that the fast tempo of the dating platforms and the perpetual connectedness afforded by them lead to more transient relationships (Yeo & Fung, 2018, p. 16).

In this short review, I provided a brief snapshot of the available literature on gay dating platforms more generally. I draw from these bodies of literature to inform my analysis of the victimisation experiences. I now move on to explaining the theoretical framework that I use in this thesis. I use some of the above discussion on gay dating platforms in general to contextualise the theory for this thesis. I then examine the existing literature on gay dating platform-related victimisation and some other literature that overlaps with such victimisation. In doing so, I illustrate a gap in the literature in the Indian context and establish the empirical contribution of my project to this field of knowledge.

## **2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.2.1 Digital Criminology**

Interactions and experiences on gay dating platforms can be understood using the theoretical tools offered by Digital Criminology. Central to Digital Criminology is the idea that the division between the virtual and the real world is blurry, and that criminology ought to take account of a techno-social worldview, instead of thinking about the “real world” and “technological/virtual world” as separate and existing as a binary (Stratton et al., 2017). Consequently, according to this worldview, crimes and harms experienced in a techno-social world can also not be classified perfectly as either “cybercrime” or “real world crime”. They can instead be conceptualised as “*technosocial practices within a digital society*” (Stratton et al., 2017). Brown postulated: “There is quite simply no such thing as a ‘technological’ crime (such as a ‘cybercrime’) as distinct from an ‘embodied’ crime; crimes [are] network activities only contain[ing] varying degrees of virtual or embodied [elements]” (Brown, 2006, p. 236). Stratton et al. (2017) used the notion of “digital society” to highlight that “technology is not separate, but is embedded in our lives, and hence, [we must]



emphasise the embedded nature of technology in our lived experiences of criminality, victimisation and justice”.

Following these arguments, in this thesis I conceptualise gay dating platform-related interactions as a technosocial phenomenon of digital society. This is because interactions, intimacies, crimes, and harms experienced on or through these platforms cannot always be siloed into online or offline (real or virtual). People make online profiles and interact with other profiles in the virtual world and then sometimes go on to meet other people in the real world for chats, dates, or sex, and sometimes maintain connection through social media or other messaging platforms. Hence, I argue that it is important to think of gay dating platform-related victimisation experiences as “network activities”, containing both virtual and physical elements. For example, embodied harms experienced by users of gay dating platforms after coming across discriminatory language used on the profiles of others is a phenomenon of digital society: (real) humans creating (virtual) profiles on (virtual) gay dating platforms which, when read by other (real) humans, cause embodied (real) impacts on them.

Moreover, Digital Criminology also posits that in digital societies, social inequities and socio-political factors that underpin crimes and justice in the physical world continue to persist (Stratton et al., 2017, p. 24). These factors shape behaviour, culture, harms, and crimes. Indeed, discrimination and exclusion along the lines of race, body type, or other physical attributes exist on gay dating platforms (see Callander et al., 2012; Carlson, 2020; Robinson, 2015) precisely because they exist in the physical world too. These are simply amplified in a digital context. So, in addition to human actors (offenders) and technological artifacts (like dating platforms), socio-political factors (like idealisation of a body type) also play a crucial

role in causing the harms. Hence, in this thesis, while examining the experiences of gay dating platform-related victimisation, I highlight the role played by not only humans, but also technological artefacts (gay dating platforms) and socio-political drivers.

### 2.2.2 Actor-Network Theory

I use Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as an analytical approach throughout this thesis. ANT provides a theoretical perspective to account for the vast array of factors (Hinduja, 2012, p. 232) that play a role in producing harms and crimes. ANT posits a flat ontological world where humans and non-humans (technological artifacts, socio-political factors) come together to form a *network* that leads to world-making (Bijker & Law, 1994; Callon, 2017; Latour, 2012; Law, 2009). ANT, as a theory, maintains that any *thing* can assemble with any *thing*: humans, non-humans, animals, machines, plants, or anything else, to create meaning in the world (Dolwick, 2009). Such *things* are called *actants*. Actants can also be non-corporeal *things*, and can include “ideas, values, concepts and beliefs” (Hartt et al., 2020, p. 61). ANT calls for a “material” turn to things (Preda, 1999): to put things to the forefront of sociological thought. This is because, according to this school of thought, things are thought to be active mediators of a phenomenon and not merely passive intermediaries (see Latour, 1992; Latour & Venn, 2002). Hence, ANT analysis urges researchers to pay equal attention to humans and non-humans in the study of a phenomenon.

Giving equal attention to humans and non-humans in research and ascribing equal agency to both does not, however, mean that ANT assigns sentience to non-humans. Rather, it is about paying attention to the new possibilities that emerge from the coming together of humans and non-humans. In ANT terms, only *assemblages* of actants lead to world-making. ANT suggests that *things* assemble differently with

different actants and can sometimes act in ways other than anticipated (Latour & Venn, 2002). Hence, ANT urges researchers to not just study humans, but also non-humans, and, more importantly, the assemblages of humans and non-humans, that make a phenomenon possible. Actants are more than actors (with agency), because it is part of a *network* (assemblage), without which it cannot work (Latour, 2005; Verbeek, 2005). For actants to effect changes in the world, they must assemble or join with other (human or non-human) actants. For example, it is a gun-human assemblage that kills, and a car-human assemblage that drives, and not just the human or the machines in isolation that undertake this action (see Latour, 2009). These assemblages of actants are called *networks*. When a network becomes so seamless that it becomes difficult to distinguish the individual actants, the network is said to have achieved *stability* (Latour, 2005). This stabilisation of networks has been termed the “black-boxing” of networks (Latour, 1994; 2005). As such, any phenomenon can be conceptualised as an ANT network consisting of multiple heterogeneous assemblages of people and things (Bennett, 2010, p. 24).

Conceptualising child exploitation material on the internet as an ANT network, Brown (2006) illustrated:

The interface between human and machine presents a problem not because of the technology nor [just] because of the wide (male) cultural support for child sexual abuse practices globally, but precisely because of the interface, the threads linking a complex network of paedophilic actants of people and things. A delicate thread which might link web-cams to pixels, the pixels to the Internet, the Internet to men, the men to economics, economics to the sex industry, the sex industry to desire, desire to paedophilia, paedophilia to killing, killing

to DNA, DNA to men . . . and so on, has to be apprehended in terms of an immanent and infinitely connected universe of quasi-objects (p. 233).

Brown (2006) argued for a posthuman understanding of crimes: it is the *network* of actants (or agents) of humans and non-humans which work together in the commission of a crime. In this thesis I have conceptualised some forms of victimisation experiences and help-seeking as ANT networks, brought into being by the assemblages of heterogenous actants. Such a focus has allowed me to uncover the ways in which humans and non-humans (technology, for example) assemble to cause and sustain victimisation practices.

Another important aspect of an ANT analysis that I have deployed considers the role of non-corporeal actants. Non-corporeal actants (NCAs) have been defined as “ideas, values, concepts and beliefs [that] should be considered actors in their own right with symmetry thereby valorizing their agency, influence and power to attract and influence other actors” (Hartt et al., 2020, p. 61). This notion has been used in the past in critical organisational historiography and sense-making scholarship to highlight the role of NCAs in influencing human/organisational decisions (Hartt, 2015; Hartt et al., 2014, 2020). In the analysis of crimes and harms that users of gay dating platforms face, prejudice and stigma against queer sexualities become important socio-political NCAs in their own right. It is because they mediate (invite, influence and shape) crimes and harms related to gay dating platforms and help-seeking in unique ways. I use ANT to highlight these influences in Chapter 5, particularly in cases where perpetrators actively *enrolled* NCAs to cause the victimisation. In Chapter 6, I again employ ANT to highlight how NCAs influence and impede help-seeking among users who have experienced victimisation.

ANT can be used to theorise both intended dating platform outcomes as well as the unintended interactions. The intended purpose or functionality of a *thing*, in ANT terms, is known as its *script* or *prescription*. The script of a gun is to shoot, and the script of a traffic light is to regulate traffic (see Latour, 2005). As in the simplest possible terms, gay dating platforms are designed to mediate socio-sexual interactions among queer people, this mediation can be referred to as the script of these platforms. In pursuance of this script, the original *prescription* of the dating platforms would be creation of a profile consisting of multiple profile pictures, biography, body measurements, ethnicity, kinks, fetishes, sexual roles, and other demographic details. Next, the script would require users to browse other profiles, find a profile that they find interesting, strike up a conversation using the “chat” feature, and if they feel like, meet in the physical world, either for a date or for a hookup. This script is available on the platforms in the form of subtle or clear inscriptions in the software. Examples of clear inscriptions include asking users to “upload a profile photo”, or ask to fill out “height, weight, body type” and other ways of digitising the self. An example of subtle inscription could be the “meet at” field in Grindr, where users can choose from options like “your place”, “my place”, bar or restaurant (Grindr, n.d.-b). This tiny inscription subtly hints at the possibility/desirability of a meet in the physical world. Overall, dating platforms, with the help of these inscriptions, *translate* (shape)<sup>6</sup> human behaviour and bring about a unique socio-sexual interaction among its users consisting of both digital (for example, chats) and physical elements (for example, meeting in-person).

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<sup>6</sup> Latour (1994) suggested that the modification of human behaviour that happens due to the functionalities of an artifact is translation.

However, the intended script of this network gets changed (*drifted* in ANT terminology) when crimes or harms are enabled by it. This is an unintended outcome of the platform for most users. This happens because actants (like gay dating platforms) assemble differently with different humans. Victimisation experiences related to gay dating platforms can be thought of as drifted scripts of the platforms. The drifting of scripts happens as a result of the interactions between human actors (perpetrators), the platforms' affordances, as well as socio-political factors (like queerphobia or sex-negativity). For example, gay dating platforms might be used by undercover journalists in some countries to entrap gay men (see Singh, 2018; Steinfeld, 2020). Such *drifting* is unintended and sometimes unthought-of by the developers of the technology. In this thesis, across Chapters 4 and 5, I conceptualise many forms of victimisation as *drifted scripts* giving rise to unintended ANT networks. I then highlight the technological, structural and socio-political factors that cause and sustain the stability of these new ANT networks of victimisation. I return to the details of the analysis methods used in the thesis in the methodology chapter (Chapter 3).

ANT has been used in the past to study cybercrimes: high-tech cybercrimes (Van der Wagen, 2017), cyber bullying (Thompson & Cupples, 2008), cyber theft (Hinduja, 2012), cyber terrorism and cyber espionage (Aradau, 2010) and in also in studying crime-prevention strategies and police-victim scripts (Robert & Dufresne, 2015). I extend this tradition of criminological studies by using ANT to uncover not just technological and human actants, but also socio-political actants causing and sustaining crimes/harms in digital society and impeding help-seeking after.

### **2.2.3 Queer Criminology**

Queer Criminology argues against homogenising the human subject of criminological as cisgender and heterosexual. The only way through which queer people have been dealt with in the criminology literature, has been through the lens of being a deviant, as mentioned before (Woods, 2015). Dalton (2016) explains that a criminological subject's sexuality plays unique roles in victimisation and offending, an attribute that is left out in most crime statistics. Gay dating platform-related victimisation is a good example to illustrate this argument. Gay dating platforms, and the interactions facilitated through them, afford unique pathways for the commission of crimes. These affordances can arise, for example, from easy access to queer individuals who are willing to invite a stranger to their house or go to meet a stranger at their house. Similarly, when it comes to reporting these crimes, users might face unique barriers for having to disclose their interest in queer sexual behaviour (Knight & Wilson, 2016, p. 67), something that will be deduced from their presence on these platforms. So, this project highlights how the context of queerness leads to unique experiences of victimisation and offending. As such, this project contributes to Queer Criminology by focussing on the "lived experience of injustice" (Ball, 2014b, p. 550) faced by people who use gay dating platforms in India.

### **2.2.4 Sex-Positive Criminology**

As many gay dating platform-related victimisation occur in hookup contexts involving sex among friends with benefits, or casual or anonymous sex, the sex-negativity of Indian society (see Chakravarti, 2011; Das, 2014; Majumdar, 2018; Shukla, 2007; Sinha-Roy & Ball, 2022; Subaiya, 2008) potentially makes disclosure of such victimisation and help-seeking difficult. Sex-Positive Criminology focuses on "consent, safety, harm reduction, and education" and argues for demystifying sex

as a taboo subject (Wodda & Panfil, 2020, p. 6). Rubin explains sex-negativity in society using the concept of the “charmed circle of sex”, which suggests that some sex (those marked by monogamy, within marriage, and for procreation) are seen as more respectable than others (those marked by non-commitment, non-monogamy or anonymity). Hence, when someone seeks help after experiencing victimisation in gay dating platform-related contexts, the judgment from sex-negative societies, including India, is harsh. This sex-negativity can feed into victim-blaming (Christie, 2016), discussed in detail further below in this chapter. Further, as mentioned before, some safe-dating advice can also inadvertently feed into victim-blaming when it focusses too much on users themselves being responsible for taking the necessary precautions to avoid victimisation (Sinha-Roy & Ball, 2022).

Sex-Positive Criminology builds upon “thick desire”: a theory that “places sexual activity...within a larger context of social and interpersonal structures that enable a person to engage in the political act of wanting” (Fine & McClelland, 2006, p. 325). The act of wanting has been conceptualised in the context of sexual activity as a right to unhindered access to structural and institutional supports, including healthcare, education and protection from coercion and violence (Fine & McClelland, 2006). Gay dating platforms bring to light a specific context where many queer people engage in specific acts of wanting: sexting or arranging for dates or hookups. As these acts of wanting are dampened by various forms of victimisation, a sex-positive perspective (such as that adopted here) would argue that these forms of victimisation are a barrier for people’s right to engage in “wanting”. Using this notion of “thick desire”, I argue that users of gay dating platforms are entitled to publicly funded enabling conditions to ensure protection from violence. I



develop this argument in Chapter 7, where I discuss people's aspirations for a society where they can access support and redress more easily after victimisation.

In this project, I directly explore the structures and institutions that make the victimisation possible, and which make help-seeking difficult. I do this in accordance with Sex-Positive Criminology's call for studies with explicit focus on structures and institutions that "oppress, persecute, stigmatize and generate conflict and suffering for people" (Wodda & Panfil, 2020, p. 11). Towards this end, I use ANT as a method of analysis to highlight some structural issues that make victimisation possible and help-seeking difficult in this context. I further contend that technological, structural, and institutional changes and supports can go a long way towards preventing victimisation and supporting people who have faced them. I elaborate upon and illustrate this line of thought in Chapter 7, where I present insights and recommendations offered by participants.

I now move on to discussing the extant literature on four separate forms of victimisation (not specific to gay dating platforms), that I develop in this thesis in the context of gay dating platforms.

### **2.3 SOME KEY FORMS OF VICTIMISATION (NOT SPECIFIC TO GAY DATING PLATFORMS)**

The four bodies of literature that I explore in this section relate to: image-based sexual abuse; romance frauds; crimes during hookups; and queerphobic hate crimes. The literature dealing with these do not explicitly discuss these harms or crimes in the context of dating platforms. Nevertheless, I review them for this thesis, as these forms of victimisation also happen in the context of gay dating platforms in India.

### **2.3.1 Image-based sexual abuse**

Image-based sexual abuse has been defined as the non-consensual creation and/or actual/threats of distribution of private sexual images (McGlynn & Rackley, 2017, p. 536). This has featured prominently as a form of gay dating platform-related victimisation in India (see for example, Press Trust of India, 2017). One form of IBSA practice that McGlynn, Rackley and Houghton (2017) discussed is that of sexual extortion. Defined as the practice of threatening to distribute someone's private sexual images to make them do something or exact revenge (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016), IBSA features quite prominently as a form of gay dating platform facilitated/enabled victimisation, in which perpetrators threaten to distribute private sexual images unless they are paid money (Press Trust of India, 2017). It has been reported that victims/survivors of sextortion experienced negative impacts on their mental health and fear of physical assault (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016, pp. 31-33).

Studies dealing with image based sexual abuse predominantly focus on heterosexual women and children. However, a 2012 study comparing heterosexual and non-heterosexual experiences consisting of 3,432 Swedish school students reported that non-heterosexual adults are at a higher risk of facing image based sexual abuse (Priebe & Svedin, 2012). Similar results were found in other studies as well (see Gámez-Guadix et al., 2015). A recent study also reported that gay and bisexual men who use geosocial dating apps fall victims to image based sexual abuse more than those who do not use such platforms (Waldman, 2019). Waldman also discussed how users on geosocial dating apps mitigate the risk of image based sexual abuse by cropping out identifying features from an intimate photo, or by sending intimate images after the recipient has shared theirs, or by chatting with a prospective recipient for some time to build trust before sending (2019, pp. 998-999). In this

thesis, I explore the contexts in which IBSA happens through gay dating platforms in India (see Chapters 5 and 6). In doing so, I move away from traditional conceptualisations of this abuse and use ANT to examine the role played by the platforms, human perpetrators, and socio-political factors like sex-negativity and queerphobia.

### **2.3.2 Romance frauds**

Romance frauds are characterised by “the development of a perceived genuine relationship” online and “the ultimate goal of financial gain on the part of the offender, through the mechanism of the relationship” (Cross, 2020, p. 2). Romance frauds have received considerable attention in the fields of criminology and psychology (Coleman, 2014; Donham, 2018; Gillespie, 2017; Rege, 2009; Whitty, 2013, 2015). This is perhaps because of the large number of people around the world who face romance frauds, when they look for romance online (Cross, 2020). Some studies have compared romance frauds with mass marketing frauds and highlighted the steps followed by offenders in a typical fraud scenario (Whitty, 2013, 2015). Other studies have highlighted the types of romance frauds (Gillespie, 2017) and examined the psychological impacts of romance frauds on victims/survivors (Buchanan & Whitty, 2014; Cross et al., 2018). In India, romance frauds have been reported to be on the rise as a form of victimisation on gay dating platforms (see Chandran, 2021). The present study adds to this body of literature by illustrating the unique ways in which users of gay dating platforms are targeted and victimised by perpetrators of romance fraud.

### **2.3.3 Crimes and risks in hookup scenarios**

Several media reports and some empirical studies on gay dating platform-related victimisation indicate that many forms of victimisation occur in hookup

scenarios. The literature on hookups shows considerable debate on the operationalisation of the word “hookup”. While some researchers have defined it as sexual relations between acquaintances or strangers (Paul et al., 2000), others have included sexual relations with friends within its ambit (Fortunato et al., 2010). Therefore, the definitional conundrum makes “hookup” a broad term for describing sexual interactions with strangers, friends and acquaintances (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). In light of the above-mentioned debate, the term hookup is used in this broad sense within this thesis.

Most studies on hookups have focussed on young heterosexual populations hooking up in college party environments. Many such studies have explored the risk of sexual assault during hookups. For example, an early study explored the factors leading to “unwanted sex” among college students in hookup situations (Flack et al., 2007). They defined “unwanted sex” broadly to include sexual assault, rape, unwanted fondling and other harmful or regretful sexual behaviour (p. 140). Based on a survey of 250 adult students at a university in North-Western US, Flack et al. reported that hookups are a risk factor for unwanted sexual intercourse. They further found that “impaired judgment due to alcohol”, miscommunication, victims’ inability or delay in resistance were the primary reasons for “unwanted sex” during hookups (2007, pp. 150–152). More recently, a 2017 American study based on a survey completed by 24,131 undergraduate students from twenty colleges, showed a strong relation between heavy drinking and sexual abuse during hookup scenarios (Ford, 2017). Ford also found that sexual assaults are perpetrated more by “in-network strangers” than men who knew their female sexual partners well (2017, p. 402). A recent study based on 1057 lesbian and bisexual women found that even for non-heterosexual women, heavy drinking was related to increased risk of sexual assault

while hooking up (Jaffe et al., 2019). However, a mid-Western US study of fifty undergraduate women and 220 undergraduate men by Wright, Norton, & Matusek (2010) reported that men were more adept in handling sexual refusal in hookup scenarios and were only likely to use coercion when angry or confused. Contrastingly, they found that women reacted more negatively following sexual refusal during hookups and were more likely to use coercion when feeling rejected (Wright, Norton, & Matusek, 2010).

In addition to the risk of sexual assault, the literature on hookups has also explored risks posed from hookups to the mental and sexual health of individuals. Paul and Hayes (2002), for example, reported that hookups have an explicit psychological risk as hookup partners may experience a mismatch of expectations and shame or regret afterwards, compounded by traditional gender-role expectations. Other studies have found that, compared to men, women disproportionately report more depressive symptoms after a hookup (see for example, Anders et al., 2019; Kahn, & Saville, 2010; Fielder, Walsh, Carey, & Carey, 2014; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). Many studies have also focussed on the link between hooking up and unprotected sexual practices (see for example, Prestage et al., 2001; Scott-Sheldon, Carey, & Carey, 2010). Nevertheless, limited studies specifically focus on the myriad forms of victimisation that users of gay dating platforms experience in hookup situations. This study addresses this gap.

#### **2.3.4 Queerphobic Hate Crimes**

Many forms of gay dating platform-related victimisation, like blackmailing, extortion, and assault, overlap with homophobic/queerphobic hate crimes. This is apparent in instances where perpetrators have been reported to use queerphobic slang during victimisation (Noronha, 2019). For this reason, in this section, I briefly review

the literature on queerphobic hate crimes. Harry (1990) theorised that perpetrators of queerphobic hate crime may be divided into activists (ones who actively seek out homosexuals to assault), opportunists (ones who disapprove of homosexuality and commit anti-gay crimes when such opportunity arises), and those who do not commit hate crimes, but help in maintaining a homophobic society (Harry, 1990). An early study, which had examined hate-motivated victimisation of gay men and lesbian women in the US, reported that victim/survivors' age, gender, prior victimisation, residence, out-ness<sup>7</sup> and prior experience with the police are all related to homophobic attacks (Tewksbury, Grossi, Suresh, & Helms, 1999). It has been shown that "gay-bashing" perpetrators generally attack unknown victims, while extortionists require a pre-existing relationship with their victims, as the crime is of a more sophisticated nature (Harry, 1982, p. 562). Hate motivated crimes perpetrated through gay dating platforms can be thought of as a newer way of committing these same forms of crimes.

Empirical studies have looked at the psychological impact of queerphobic hate crimes on victims/survivors. For instance, Herek, Cogan, & Gillis (2002), through their interviews with 450 sexual-minority adults in California (US), found that homophobic harassment can lead to increased distress, anxiety, vulnerability, isolation, insecurity, low self-esteem and confidence. Similarly, Cull, Platzer, and Balloch (2006) conducted in-depth interviews and surveys with forty-four young homeless LGBT individuals at Brighton and Hove in the UK. They reported that homophobic hate crime experiences could have long term mental health effects that

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<sup>7</sup> Being 'out' is a colloquial term that refers to being publicly open about one's queer identity. It comes from the term 'coming out of the closet', a metaphor used for the act of disclosing one's queer identity to others

can lead to relationship problems, substance abuse, and homelessness (Cull et al., 2006). Michael Bell Associates, through a mixed-methods study in four UK towns, found that victims/survivors of homophobic, racist and religious prejudice motivated hate crimes are fearful of repeat attacks, face anger, mental illness, and often restrict their lifestyle (2006). Similarly, Robinson and Berman, based on a survey and interviews with LGBTIQ identified victims of hate crimes in Queensland, Australia, found that homophobic/transphobic crimes produced psychological trauma and resulted in many victims/survivors concealing their sexual orientation (2010).

Notably, no readily available literature looks at queerphobic crimes against queer individuals in India, perhaps because gay sex was a crime in India until 2018. Although technically only certain queer sex acts were criminalised, the law was used by the police to disproportionately harass and extort money from queer people in general (see Mandal, 2018; Nagar and DasGupta, 2015). Moreover, no separate category of crime exists in India called “hate crime” on the basis of sexuality. Nevertheless, many documented experiences of violence (International Commission of Jurists, 2019; Menon-C, 2019; Sen et al., 2020) faced by queer people in India overlap with hate crimes. This thesis adds to this body of literature by highlighting a unique context (gay dating platforms) in/through which crimes are committed against queer people in India, which are sometimes motivated by hate. In the next section. I discuss the existing literature on gay dating platform related crimes and harms and highlight the gap in this literature in the Indian context.

## **2.4 GAY DATING PLATFORM-RELATED RISKS AND VICTIMISATION**

Gay dating platforms facilitate or enable varied forms of victimisation. Examples of subtler forms of abuse may include discrimination or bullying, arising, for example, out of racism, transphobia, body shaming, and other prejudices, often

disguised under an individual's sexual or other "preferences" (see Callander et al., 2012; Carlson, 2020; Robinson, 2015). Examples of more blatant forms of abuse include theft, robbery, image-based sexual abuse, and physical and sexual assault, mentioned before. In this part of the literature review, I examine the existing literature on these forms of victimisation related to gay dating platforms and situate the present thesis within that literature.

#### **2.4.1 Discrimination, exclusion, and harassment on gay dating platforms**

Many recent studies have examined how gay dating platforms afford and facilitate bullying and harassment based on body-type, race, disability, nationality or gender expression. Mentioning explicitly exclusionary phrases like "no femme", "no Asians", or "no fatties" on one's profile description, and using filters and blocks strategically to exclude individuals (of certain races or body types), are common on gay digital dating platforms (Clay, 2018; Conner, 2018). Some studies have focussed specifically on sexual racism on gay dating platforms. Sexual racism has been defined as "a specific form of racial prejudice enacted in the context of sex and dating." (Callander, et al., 2016, p. 3). Based on a survey of 2177 men across Australia, Callander et al. (2016) reported that people using gay dating platforms view sexual racism more favourably than people who have not been on those platforms. Using data from 15 in-depth interviews with gay, homosexual, and queer men who used Adam4Adam in an urban city in the Southwest US, Robinson (2015) also reported that racism is normalised on gay dating platforms under the neoliberal discourse of "personal preference". Drawing from a mixed methods study and 13 interviews, Carlson (2020) reported incidences of sexual racism faced by Indigenous Australians on Grindr and Tinder. In an ethnographic work involving participant observation and interviews with migrant Grindr users in the greater Copenhagen



area, Shield (2018) similarly found that the platform facilitates exclusion and discrimination based on sex, gender, ability, race, migration, background, and HIV status. Such findings were also reported in non-white centric contexts as well. For example, Ang et al. (2021)'s study of Grindr users in Singapore reported there exists a racial hierarchy of desire on the platform, with the racial majority (Singaporean Chinese) being on the top of the list.

Some studies examined the way that the affordances of gay dating platforms created exclusion on these platforms. For example, Clay's research on Grindr users reported that the "tribes" function of Grindr can be exclusionary for many (Clay, 2018).<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Conner's (2018) research found that body typing, ageism, racism, and serostatus-related stigma are reinforced through users' self-performance on these platforms. Conner argued that Grindr users perpetrate such discrimination under the guise of "preference" more blatantly in online settings (2018, p. 12). Conner concluded that gay dating platforms' emphasis on "sexual capital" to mean race, age, and body type takes the focus away from non-physical attributes of a user (2018, p. 19). More recently, Connor (2022) similarly found that dating apps are structured to promote evaluating, and stigmatising other users and promoting a sexual hierarchy rooted in heteronormative gender roles (Conner, 2022). This discussion highlights the subtle and blatant online exclusionary and discriminatory practices of gay dating platforms.

Some studies on gay dating platforms focussed on other forms of harassment. For example, based on a mixed methods study in Australia, Albury et al. (2019)

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<sup>8</sup> Gay dating platforms, like Grindr, allow categorising and filtering users based on 'tribes', which are gay subcultural identities based on characteristics like personality, body type, sexual fetishes and HIV serostatus (see Clay, 2018, p. 237).

reported that LGBTQ+ users experienced more harassment on dating platforms than cisgender heterosexual populations, which can lead to frustration, exclusion and rejection. Dietzel's (2021b) interviews with 25 users of gay dating platforms in Canada revealed that users receive unsolicited "dick pics" many times on these platforms. Based on attractiveness and sexual arousal, participants classed the unsolicited "dick pics" into "unwanted, consensual or typical". Dietzel further argued that gay dating platforms perpetuate a culture where sending and receiving unsolicited "dick pics" is normalised and minimised. Other studies have looked at harassment on dating platforms more generally, focussing primarily on heterosexual women. For example, based on a qualitative study on women's "everyday" experiences of intrusive interactions on Tinder in Australia, Gillett (2018) argued that most of these experiences are trivialised/normalised, resulting in misrepresentation of women's abusive experiences on dating apps. Other studies have also looked at and celebrated users' retaliatory responses to harassment on dating platforms (see Shaw, 2016; Thompson, 2018).

There are some studies in the Indian context that have looked at this issue. These studies have reported on incidences of ageism, femmephobia, classism and casteism being perpetuated in gay dating platform environments in India. Khubchandani (2019) briefly alluded to the policing of "femme, fat and dark bodies" on gay dating platforms and reported that the anonymity of the platforms allows people to blatantly demean such bodies. They also noted how these prejudices are much less blatant in offline environments. Dasgupta (2017), in an ethnographic study on digital intimacies, also found instances of prejudice against "effeminate subject positions (effeminophobia)" on PlanetRomeo (p. 95). Sharma & Samanta (2020), through qualitative interviews with 30 older gay men in Mumbai, spoke about how

Grindr users perform and desire masculinity by using terms like “no trans”, “be physically fit”, “gym toned”, and “strong arms”. DasGupta’s (2019) five year long ethnographic study in India illustrated how people on gay dating platforms want to socialise (both sexually and non-sexually) only with people having higher socio-economic capital (see also Nagar, 2018). To perpetuate such discrimination, many gay dating platform users in India rely on other users’ proficiency in English language (on profile descriptions or chats) (see Birnholtz et al., 2020), as English is often understood as a marker of class privilege. This is also invariably linked to caste, as Ponniah & Tamalapakula’s (2020) case study of two Dalit participants in Delhi illustrated. They reported on the prevalence of caste-based prejudice and violence on gay dating apps, and how desirability was linked to “*savarna* middle class, good English, [and] good family” (Ponniah & Tamalapakula, 2020, p. 4). The present study adds to this body of literature by highlighting more cases of discrimination and exclusion in the Indian context. However, in my study, using ANT, I conceptualise these as network activity, made possible by the interactions of humans and non-human actors within a certain socio-political environment. This is a unique perspective that has not been taken in the existing literature.

#### **2.4.2 Privacy issues and data security**

Many studies have also focussed on the perception of safety on these platforms. As stated earlier, there were concerns among users of being outed, being perceived as promiscuous and someone accidentally opening the app on their phones and being embarrassed by nude images and sexts (Albury & Byron, 2016). Some studies also discussed issues and lack of transparency around the use/protection of data on gay dating platforms. For example, Shetty, Grispos & Choo (2017) evaluated seven dating apps and found that five of them were vulnerable to data security risks

because of low security mechanisms. Sriram (2020) highlighted multiple instances of data leaks on Grindr, especially data regarding its users' locations, and recommended legal changes in the US that can compel dating platforms to make their data protection measures more secure. As mentioned briefly before, in the Indian context, only one study, based on interviews with 35 MSM (men who have sex with men) in Mumbai, reported on thefts of photos (for catfishing), and threats of outing on social media (found via links attached to the dating profiles) (Birnholtz et al., 2020). The present study expands on and adds to this body of literature by looking at such victimisation experiences through an ANT lens.

### **2.4.3 Dating platform-related risky sexual practices**

Some studies have focussed on how gay dating platforms may enable risky sexual practices. Many people on gay dating platforms mention their HIV serostatus,<sup>9</sup> allowing other users to sort people based on their HIV serostatus, also known as serosorting (Newcomb et al., 2016). Although this does not in itself promote risky sex, Purcell et al. (2017) contended that switching from condom use to serosorting for preventing HIV infection might be risky. Some studies have reported that this enhances practices like “bug-chasing” (see García-Iglesias, 2020), a fetish involving the desire to get infected with HIV (Jaspal, 2019). Other studies have focussed on the prevalence as well as prevention of “unsafe sexual practices” through gay dating platforms. For instance, Boonchutima and Kongchan (2017) contended that users of gay dating platforms in Thailand received encouragement from other users for motivational substance abuse. Similarly, Rice, et al. (2012) and Tang et al. (2016) concur that gay dating platforms facilitate risky sexual behaviour,

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<sup>9</sup> Serostatus is a medical term, and in the context of HIV, refers to the amount of HIV antibodies present in the blood (serum), which is an indication of HIV infection.

but argue that these platforms can also be successfully used to disseminate knowledge of safe sex practices (through pop up advertisements, for example). Other studies have concluded that seeking sex through dating apps is not related to any greater likelihood of risky/unsafe sexual practices. For example, a cross-sectional survey of 1,342 men who have sex with men in China found no significant difference between those who used gay dating platforms and those who did not (Bien et al., 2015). Similar results were also found by Lehmilller & Ioerge (2014) in a U.S.-based sample of 110 adult men who have sex with men. They concluded that although users of gay dating platforms had more sexual partners than non-users, there was no difference in the frequency of unsafe sexual practices between app users and non-users.

In India, MSM have been characterised as a high-risk group for HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (see Isac et al., 2022; NACO, 2020, 2022). A recent mixed methods study with gay dating platform users in six cities of India showed low levels of awareness and testing of HIV and other STISs (Pal, Pathak & Rahaman, 2023). Recent government reports have acknowledged that many MSM and transgender people use dating platforms to find sexual partners in recent times, and have planned digital intervention strategies to initiate and sustain HIV prevention methods (NACO, 2022). Cumulatively, there exists an agreement among the literature based in India that MSM, whether cruising in physical spaces, or using gay dating platforms to find sexual partners, remain a high-risk group for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Many organisations and government bodies in India are increasingly using the digital medium for interventions and campaigns against HIV and other STIs (Das et al., 2019; Patel et al., 2019; Patel et al., 2020).

Studies have also focussed on how users negotiate safety on gay dating platforms. For example, Race (2015, pp. 260–266) described how the chat interface itself is used to negotiate safe sex practices and establish rules before deciding to meet for a sexual encounter. Davis et al. (2016) state that online dating platforms provide some means of establishing knowledge of another user before meeting them, so that their strange-ness is reduced. This is because a reciprocal exchange of identifying information (presumed to be true) offers some perception of protection. However, they add that this perception is not entirely accurate and that its inaccuracy is illustrated “through stories of sexual violence” (2016, p. 846). I now turn to the literature that reports on violent and sexual offences facilitated by dating platforms.

#### **2.4.4 Dating platform facilitated sexual assault and violent crimes**

As stated earlier, gay dating platforms facilitate many forms of victimisation that occur after meeting someone in-person, including criminal intimidation, physical, and sexual assault. They can be conceptualised as a form of victimisation perpetrated by individuals who victims/survivors met on gay dating platforms. In this section, I examine a few studies that have looked explicitly at those in-person victimisation experiences by perpetrators met on gay dating platforms or social networking sites. Based on their quantitative survey of 636 university students in Hong Kong, Choi, Wong and Fong (2018) reported a positive correlation between dating app use and sexual abuse among men and women. They argued that reasons for this correlation include increased accessibility to strangers, the ready availability of personal information and unmatched expectation of sexual activity at the first meeting (Choi et al., 2018, p. 360). Dietzel (2021a), based on interviews with 25 gay dating app users, reported on the prevalence and normalisation of rape culture across online and offline interactions facilitated by gay dating platforms. Rowse et al.’s

(2020) study of 76 sexual assault forensic files (of women) in the UK highlighted the increased role of dating apps in facilitating sexual assault, during the first in-person interaction with someone met via dating platforms. They also argued that first face-to-face interaction through dating platforms is not thought of as stranger interaction due to the “online disinhibition effect” (lower inhibition during online communications), and intense relationship formation online (Rowse et al., 2020).

Fansher & Randa (2019), based on survey data collected from 1310 undergraduate students in 2016, found that participants experienced stalking, cyberstalking and sexual assault facilitated by social media apps. They also reported a positive correlation between low impulse control and victimisation initiated through social media (including dating apps), using the Lifestyles-Routine Activity Theory (Fansher & Randa, 2019). A recent study focussing specifically on gay men using dating apps in rural areas documented experiences of deception, catfishing, cyberbullying and coercive sexual experiences (Lauckner et al., 2019). Although this was a qualitative study with a small sample size (n=20), it highlights a significant gap in the literature and calls for more research in this area, especially with a mental and sexual health focus (p. 302). Pooley & Boxall (2020), through a narrative literature review and analysis of 15 dating apps, found that dating app users face a higher risk of “sexual and violent victimisation” than non-users, and that app features intended to promote safety sometimes put users at risk and also place the responsibility of safety on the users themselves.

In this short review, I examined the literature that has dealt with dating platform-related crimes and abuses. This highlights a clear gap in the literature when it comes to gay dating platform facilitated victimisation in India that this thesis

addresses. I now turn to the literature on barriers that queer people face when it comes to reporting crimes.

## **2.5 REPORTING BARRIERS FACED BY QUEER INDIVIDUALS**

Reporting behaviour is an important coping mechanism for the victims/survivors of homophobic and transphobic hate crimes. This is because it seems like an effective next step in terms of seeking justice or receiving closure, and can be seen as a service to the queer community as a whole (Feddes & Jonas, 2016, p. 63). However, when it comes to reporting crimes, queer people face several unique barriers, in addition to the usual feelings of vulnerability and disadvantage. These primarily include shame and fear of prejudice (Knight & Wilson, 2016, p. 67). Berrill and Herek have conceptualised these barriers as a form of “secondary victimisation”, the perpetrators of which include family, friends, workplaces, and the State (1990, pp. 401–402).

Fear of victim-blaming has been identified as a key reason why people do not report crimes. Victim blaming can be understood as a concept where victims/survivors of certain crimes are blamed either completely or partially for their own victimisation (see Cross, 2018). It arose mostly out of individual theories of victimisation like victim precipitation and lifestyle theory (Walklate, 2007). These theories directly or indirectly focussed on the contribution of the victim/survivor in the victimisation and sought to prevent such victimisation by regulating victim/survivor behaviour. Victim-blaming also creates a category of victims/survivors who are seen to be deserving of help and those who are not (Christie, 2016). Those undeserving of help and support have been termed “non-ideal victims”, who are held somewhat responsible for their own victimisation (Christie, 2016); I elaborate upon this and explain its relevance to gay dating platform related



victimisation in Chapter 6). Victims/survivors of sexual assault and frauds face significant victim-blaming (Cross, 2018). Male victims/survivors of rape who are queer also face considerable victim-blaming because of a lack of social acknowledgment of male victims/survivors of rape (Rumney, 2014) and queerphobia (Davies & McCartney, 2003). Few studies have explored victim-blaming in the context of India – most notably Sarkar and Rajan (2020), who reported that women survivors of cyberviolence face considerable victim-blaming by society and police in India. I extend this body of literature while examining victim-blaming as experienced by queer people when reporting crimes in the context of gay dating platforms and hookup scenarios.

Hate crimes against gay men have also been linked to victim-blame and have been conceptualised as “victimization which is perpetrated upon “presumed deviants” who, because of their deviant status, are presumed unable to avail themselves of civil protection [like reporting or help-seeking]” (Harry, 1982, p. 546). Many studies have explored the reasons behind non-reporting of crimes by queer people. Comstock (1989) reported that fear of police abuse, homophobia, and outing (public disclosure of one’s sexual orientation) were the primary reasons for non-reporting of crimes by lesbian and gay victims/survivors (p. 104). Based on a mix of quantitative and qualitative data, Peel (1999) concluded that practicality, safety, and self-blame were some of the chief reasons for non-reporting, and the reasons were grounded “within a broader social and political context”, including apprehensions about homophobia, prejudice and patriarchy by the police (p. 165). Bernstein and Kostelac’s quantitative survey with police officers in Southwest US (2002) reiterated this apprehension while reporting that police officers themselves believed that the police did not take non-heterosexual individuals seriously and did not treat them

equally to heterosexual individuals (pp. 317, 323). Culotta's (2005) qualitative interviews with police officers, victim advocates, and prosecutors in Chicago (US) similarly found that the primary personal barriers that prevent LGBT victims/survivors from reporting hate crimes are fear of being outed, harassment and intimidation by the police, moral prejudice, and other negative responses from the police (p. 24).

Similar findings have also emerged in research elsewhere in the world. For example, in a quantitative study of 487 LGB identifying people in Gauteng in South Africa, Wells and Polders (2006) found that their respondents faced similar barriers to crime-reporting. They found that fear of not being taken seriously, perceived/real ineffectiveness of the police, friends' unpleasant experience with the police, fear of being abused by the police, outing, and embarrassment were some of the factors for non-reporting (p. 26). In Australia, *Coming Forward*, a 2008 Report based on a survey of LGBT Victorians, found that seven out of ten victims/survivors of homophobic violence did not report it to the police. The reasons for non-reporting included unfair treatment, fear of discrimination and being "outed", procedural confusion, previous negative experiences and perceived police homophobia (Leonard et al., 2008, p. 38). Similarly, a large quantitative survey in Queensland (Australia) found that seventy-five per cent of respondents did not report their experience of homophobic/transphobic violence and that they had very similar reasons for non-reporting (Robinson & Berman, 2010). Another Australian study found that LGBT+ individuals were more reluctant to report crimes to the police and had more negative perceptions of the police than their heterosexual counterparts (Miles-Johnson, 2013) and that a "belief in police homophobia" is one of the primary reasons for this reluctance (p. 11).

Similarly, in the UK, Chakraborti and Hardy (2015) identified six reasons for non-reporting among victims/survivors of LGBT hate crimes, including downplaying/normalising the victimisation experience, negative perceptions about the police, fear of being outed, and lack of awareness as to the process of reporting. In addition to these, Chakraborti and Hardy also found that it was often unclear to the victims/survivors if their experience counted as a hate crime, how to report such incidents, and what result such reporting would yield (2015, p. 24). Likewise, in the Netherlands, a mixed-methods study found that the main reasons for non-reporting of crimes included perceptions of the incident not being serious enough, the police not taking complaints seriously, shame, negative experiences with reporting in the past, fear of further backlash from the perpetrators, lack of procedural knowledge about reporting, and just wanting to leave the experience behind (Feddes & Jonas, 2016).

A recurrent theme that seems to run among the barriers identified above is the belief or apprehension about police prejudice and homophobia. Although global movements on civil rights are slowly improving the social acceptance of queer people, especially through legal advancements (see Sen et al., 2020; Sircar & Jain, 2012), around the world, the culture of distrust continues. This has been argued as a vestige of the complicated and violent history of policing LGBT individuals (see Wolff & Cokely, 2007; Dwyer, 2014). In the next section, I highlight the complicated relation between the police and the queer population in India, which might act as a barrier in crime-reporting by queer people.

India has its own complicated and violent history of policing of queer individuals, which is sparsely documented. This is especially so because of section 377 of the *Indian Penal Code*. Since its coming into force in 1860, this infamous law, along with a few other laws, had given the police authority to harass and assault

queer people (Rege, 1996). The actual number of reported judgements where section 377 has been used to prosecute people is low, at only thirty cases in the period between 1860-1992 (PUCL-Karnataka, 2001, p. 12). However, the police had weaponised it to routinely entrap, harass, blackmail and extort money from queer people who cruised in public spaces (see Misra, 2009). The police had also illegally detained, abused and sometimes outed individuals to their families (for some documented instances, see PUCL-Karnataka, 2001, pp. 13–14). Notably, in 2001, two prominent NGOs working for queer rights and against HIV infection were raided and NGO workers were detained for days in police custody on the grounds of running a “sex racket” (see Cohen, 2009). Except for famous cases like these, none of the police encounters, arrests or detentions were recorded by the police, so there is not much formal documentary evidence of these police atrocities. Not surprisingly, it was Naz Foundation, one of the raided NGOs, which had first filed a public interest petition arguing that section 377 of the *Indian Penal Code, 1860* was unconstitutional, which paved the way for the eventual decriminalisation of gay sex in India. Although the law criminalising homosexual acts no longer exists, India is still far from a pro-LGBT culture and this is reflected in policing (Bhattacharjee, 2020; International commission of Jurists, 2022). There has been no systematic study documenting the reasons for non-reporting of crime by queer people in India, although many NGO reports mention the issue briefly (see Bhandari et al., 1991; PUCL-Karnataka, 2001). This is perhaps because much of the legal and criminological scholarship (see for example, Baudh, 2013; Dave, 2012, p. 167; Narrain & Bhan, 2005) in India had been focussed on the repeal of section 377—an essential first step towards meaningful engagement with the criminal justice system.

In this thesis, I address this silence of the archives by shedding light on the barriers that gay dating platform users face for reporting such victimisation. This discussion connects well with the theoretical perspectives forwarded by Queer Criminology. As mentioned in the Introduction, Queer Criminology seeks to study the unique contexts within which queer individuals experience crimes (see Ball, 2016; Buist & Lenning, 2016; Woods, 2014). It also seeks to study the uniqueness of their experiences with the criminal justice system. As shown in the above discussion, queer people indeed face some unique barriers when it comes to reporting crimes or interacting with the police. However, such barriers have not been explored in the context of gay dating platform related crimes in the Indian context. More specifically, Chapter 6 of this thesis addresses this gap in the literature in documenting the unique barriers that users of gay dating platforms face in reporting crimes to the police in India.

## **2.6 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I examined the existing general literature around gay dating platforms thematically, which I draw upon to contextualise the thesis. I then presented the three theories that I use in my thesis: Digital Criminology, Queer Criminology and Sex-Positive Criminology. I also introduced Actor-Network Theory that I use as a method of analysis in this thesis, which I return to in more detail in Chapter 4. I then examined the general broader available literature (not specific to gay dating platforms) on some forms of victimisation, that I expand upon in this thesis. I subsequently examined the extant literature on specific gay dating platform-related victimisation and the barriers faced by queer people in reporting crimes and highlighted a gap in such literature in India.

The present study fills this gap in the literature by exploring this issue comprehensively by these main research questions: (RQ1) What forms of victimisation are experienced by the users of gay dating platforms in India, in what contexts do they occur, and what factors play a role in such victimisation?; (RQ2) What are the consequences and impacts of gay dating platform-related victimisation?; (RQ3) How do the users of gay dating platforms respond to victimisation and what challenges do they face in doing so? Additionally, I also answer (RQ4) How can gay dating platform-related victimisation be prevented or addressed? to highlight the participants' voices in demanding safer gay dating platform-related experiences. In the next chapter, I explain the methodology and methods adopted in this thesis.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

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The purpose of this project is to build understanding of victimisation experiences of the users of gay dating platforms in India by answering four research questions. Towards this end, I draw upon semi-structured interview data from 14 participants. In this chapter, I explain in detail the methodological approach taken in this thesis. I discuss the exploratory tools and the qualitative approach taken and clarify the rationale behind selecting semi-structured interviews as my data collection method. I then move on to detail how I conducted the interviews, particularly as these were carried out remotely during COVID-19 because of the resulting border closures across the world. In this section, I also explain the recruitment process for the interviews. Next, I enumerate the ethical issues arising from this project, and explain how I managed them. In that section, I comment on my positionality as researcher in respect to the project, and how I actively reduced power imbalances between myself and the research participants. I finally discuss the data analysis methods I employed to study and present the data and mention some limitations of this project.

### 3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

The extant literature on gay dating platform-related victimisation in India is very limited, as highlighted in Chapter 2, hence, an exploratory study is appropriate for this thesis. Exploratory studies are generally undertaken in areas where little scientific knowledge exists (Stebbins, 2008). As established in Chapter 1, there does not exist much empirical evidence on gay dating platform-related victimisation. Hence, I have designed this thesis as a broad exploratory study of these cases. Social science exploration has been defined as a “broad-ranging, purposive, systematic,

prearranged undertaking designed to maximize the discovery of generalizations leading to description and understanding of an area of social or psychological life” (Stebbins, 2011, p. 3). This project seeks to understand and describe a broad range of crimes and harms related to gay dating platforms in India, and therefore, an exploratory study is appropriate. In addition, exploratory studies are primarily inductive, as researchers work within their *emerging* theoretical framework, as opposed to within *established* theories and the hypotheses derived from them (Stebbins, 2011). This is another reason that an exploratory approach is appropriate here.

As my research questions are open-ended and seek to investigate the contexts of victimisation experiences, a qualitative study, as opposed to a quantitative one, is best suited towards this end. This is because qualitative studies allow for listening to and amplifying the experiences of participants (Gair & van Luyn, 2016). I use a qualitative (exploratory) study to capture insights, individual thoughts and contexts of gay dating platform-related victimisation experiences. To “listen” to participant experiences, I used semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection in this thesis. I collected data in the form of detailed narratives of victimisation from semi-structured interviews with fourteen individuals who have experienced victimisation. I also interviewed three support workers to understand their concerns and challenges at a community level. Owing to their conversational style, semi-structured interviews helped put participants at ease and share their stories. I discuss this method in more detail below.

### **3.2 DATA COLLECTION: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

I employed semi-structured in-depth interviews as my method of data collection for several reasons. Firstly, semi-structured interviews have been used in



studies aimed at constructing meanings and understanding experiences of a particular group (Seidman, 2006). As this thesis is seeking to explore shared victimisation experiences of a particular group of people, semi-structured interviews are an appropriate data collection method for the project. As the victimisation experiences are of a sensitive and highly personal nature, it was very important that the participants were in control of the process and were as comfortable as possible. One-on-one conversations were best suited in this situation, as they put the participants at ease, ensuring they did not have to worry about offending anyone and could speak their mind without any interruptions or disagreements (Guest et al., 2017). Moreover, as semi-structured interviews are conversational, it was a more familiar form of interaction for all (see Guest et al., 2017). This allowed the participants to discuss their experiences more comfortably than other unfamiliar types of interactions, like focus group discussions. This was even more crucial in this project as the participants were sharing with me deeply personal stories of victimisation, which some had not shared with anyone before. Further, this familiar, conversational form of data collection allowed me to develop a good rapport with the participants, which would have been more challenging with other data collection methods. Studies have shown that rapport building is essential to make interview responses more meaningful (Bryman, 2012; Lichtman, 2014) and to promote a respectful research relationship (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

Semi-structured interviews also allowed for flexibility in terms of participant response while maintaining a general direction to the conversation (Fylan, 2005; Lichtman, 2014). They allowed for improvisation and unplanned questions in the event of unexpected leads. As flexibility and open-mindedness are key to exploratory studies (Stebbins, 2008, p. 327, 2011), semi-structured interviews were a good fit for

my study. It also allowed me to adapt the interviews to the comfort and safety needs of each participant. Additionally, the open-ended questions (see Appendix A and B) in the semi-structured interviews allowed participants to have control over their narratives, by allowing them to choose how much detail they wanted to discuss comfortably (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Bryman, 2012; Qu & Dumay, 2011). I also reiterated multiple times throughout the interviews that participants could skip any question, should they be uncomfortable.

As research participants in this project were traditionally oppressed, silenced and fought hard to find voice (see Ranade et al., 2020; Sen et al., 2020; Srivastava, 2014), it was very important that my research was designed in a way that respected agency and participant voice. Studies have previously reported that reciprocal conversations help reduce power imbalances between researcher and research participants (Sarantakos, 2013; Westmarland & Bows, 2018). As such, during the interviews, instead of taking control of the conversation, I asked very open-ended questions, and let participants respond by steering the conversation in any way they liked, allowing for participant agency, and making them co-producers of research knowledge. Further to this, I asked all participants “what do you think would have helped you at that time?” and “what changes would you like to see now?”. Their responses to these questions helped me curate ideas of reform and change that form part of the Recommendation Chapter (Chapter 7). This helped me to not only foreground participant voices in the description of problems (harms and crimes), but also in recommending reforms and advocating for change. This allowed for the thesis to move away from merely “measuring and cataloguing” victims/survivors experiences (Bowden & Green, 2010; O’Sullivan, 2015), and instead, to embed their voices in recommendations and change.

### 3.2.1 Sampling and Recruitment

In order to recruit people who have experienced crimes/harms via gay dating platforms in India for this project, I used a convenience, self-selecting sampling method, as I wanted participants to independently opt-in into the study, as opposed to them being directly invited by me (or someone else) for participation the research. This was to respect participant agency in deciding to participate in a project, where they would disclose sensitive and potentially triggering information. The inclusion criteria for participating in the project was being above 18 years of age and experiencing a crime/harm facilitated through a gay dating platform in India. Owing to a lack of empirical data on gay dating platform-related victimisation, I did not narrow the study to any particular type of victimisation.

Moreover, considering the small sample size and the self-recruitment strategy employed, I could not target people from diverse demographic characteristics, like gender, sexuality, caste, class, religion, or region. Although undoubtedly, such characteristics would have an impact on the victimisation dynamics, in this exploratory study, my primary aim was to understand the victimisation incidents from people who have faced them, and who were ready to share these experiences. I recruited interview participants primarily by advertising on two digital spaces: LGBTQIA+ Facebook groups based in India and Grindr India.<sup>10</sup> Firstly, to establish the credibility and authenticity of the project, I created a study-specific webpage hosted by the Queensland University of Technology domain, with details of the researcher and the research project. Next, I created a study flyer (see Appendix C) and shared it on various Indian LGBTQIA+ Facebook groups using a researcher

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<sup>10</sup> Grindr allows advertisers to select a particular geographical location for advertising. The advertising landing webpage is <https://www.grindr.com/advertise/>

Facebook profile that I had created for this purpose. The flyer provided some basic information about the project, my contact details, and directed prospective participants to the project webpage. I also advertised the project on Grindr in India, given the dominance of Grindr as a gay dating platform (see Appendix D). However, midway through my recruitment process, Grindr pulled all its advertisements from various countries including India, owing to a privacy breach lawsuit against the company. This meant that my Grindr advertisement only ran for a very short time. To further the reach of the recruitment advertisement, I asked my friends and acquaintances from India to “share” a study flyer, with a link to the research webpage and contact details, especially in LGBTQIA+ circles or online groups that they are a part of. Interested participants contacted me directly by email, Facebook direct message, or a WhatsApp account set up using a project-specific pre-paid phone number. During this contact, I confirmed whether the potential participant fulfilled the inclusion criteria. I ascertained what experience (very broadly) they would like to talk about, and their age. Once I determined that they fit into the scope of the experiences I was seeking to explore, I sent them the participant information sheet and questionnaire, and also provided a brief summary of it in simple language (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2018, p. 16). This informed the participants of the project outline in more detail, the contribution required of them in the study, and the risks involved. Although all participants were given one week to consider participation after receiving the recruitment documentation, all participants decided in a few minutes of receiving the documentation that they wanted to participate in the project. We set up a date, time and medium for the interviews after this. I conducted all the fourteen interviews over telephone or WhatsApp voice calls.

I recruited support workers via direct invitation. I sent emails to support organisations working in the area, specifically those who have handled dating app-related crisis cases, inviting participation. I also requested the support workers refer to me others who might have knowledge of or experience in handling such cases, thus utilising a snowball recruiting method. On receipt of interest, I sent potential participants the participant information sheet, questionnaire, and contact details. We decided on a date and time for the interview via email or WhatsApp. I conducted three interviews with support workers: two via WhatsApp voice calls, and one via a telephone call.

Before the interview commenced, I informed all participants the full requirements of their participation in the study in plain language, as well as the research aims and benefits, how they could withdraw from the research, how they could make a complaint about the research, and how their information would be securely stored. I reaffirmed a summarised participant information sheet verbally/electronically to each participant prior to the interview.

### 3.3 DATA

I interviewed 14 people who experienced gay dating platform-related victimisation in India, and 3 support workers who have been dealing with such cases.

I have presented some pertinent aspects of the data as a table here:

Table 3.1

*Participants, type of victimisation experienced and location of the incidents*

No.	Participant	Victimisation experienced	City
1	Holly (he/him)	IBSA Unwanted sex	New Delhi Gurgaon
2	Boishakh (he/him)	Blackmail	Kolkata
3	Suman (he/him)	Catfishing Extortion attempt with assault	New Delhi New Delhi

No.	Participant	Victimisation experienced	City
		Unwanted sex	New Delhi
4	Venu (they/them)	Extortion attempt with threats of outing	Bengaluru
		Violation of private space with assault	Bengaluru
5	Aranyak (he/him)	Romance fraud	New Delhi
6	Tushar (he/him)	Extortion with intimidation	New Delhi
7	Anand (he/him)	Extortion with threats of outing	Chennai
8	Rajveer (he/him)	Abduction attempt	Faridabad
		IBSA	Faridabad
9	Karan (he/him)	Catfishing	New Delhi
		Extortion with assault	New Delhi
		Discrimination and exclusion	New Delhi
10	Kartik (he/him)	Catfishing	New Delhi
		Extortion with assault	New Delhi
11	Ravi (he/him)	Catfishing	Faridabad
		Unwanted sex	Faridabad
12	Nicks (he/him)	Extortion with intimidation	Small town (undisclosed)
		FWB fraud	Small town (undisclosed)
13	Malik (he/him)	Catfishing	New Delhi
		Violation of private space with assault	New Delhi
		Unwanted sex	New Delhi
14	Paras (he/him)	Unwanted sex	New Delhi
15	Support worker 1 (she/her)	NA	Mumbai
		Violation of privacy	Mumbai
16	Support worker 2 (he/him)	NA	Mumbai
17	Support worker 3 (he/him)	NA	Bengaluru

### 3.4 RESEARCH ETHICS

There were a number of ethical considerations that were managed during fieldwork for this project. These issues related to consent, confidentiality, and managing distress during the interviews. In accordance with the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007, this research required ethical clearance before data collection could commence. I applied for and received high-risk ethics approval from the QUT Human Research Ethics Committee on 31

August 2020 (approval number 2000000493). I discuss in this section how I managed the ethical considerations mentioned here.

### **3.4.1 Consent, privacy, and confidentiality**

As discussed above, I sent all participants the participant information sheet and an interview questionnaire. Both the documents informed them of the project details, what their participation involved, their right of withdrawal, information on the recording of the interviews, and anonymisation of data. This ensured that their consent to participate was informed. Before starting the interviews, I sought verbal consent, instead of asking for written consent, so as not to have a written record of participant details, in line with ethics approval. This was done due to social stigma around queer sexualities and victimisation. Anonymous verbal consent meant that no record of the participants' real names or signatures were stored anywhere, ensuring that the participants cannot be traced back from the data. During the verbal consent process, I verbally informed the participants about the project in plain language, and reiterated the information contained in the participant information sheet. After doing so, I asked participants if they had any questions. After answering their questions and ensuring that they understood the project and details about participation, I asked them for consent to start and record the interviews. The verbal consent conversation formed part of the transcript. Support workers had the option of providing written consent as well, although all three support workers opted for verbal consent due to convenience.

Considering societal stigma around queer sexual identities, and around being on a gay dating platform, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality was of extreme importance in this study. To protect the privacy of the participants during recruitment, I provided a disclaimer along with the recruitment flyer warning

potential participants against liking or commenting on the page or any of its posts, if they had any such concerns. During the interviews, I anonymised the interview data by asking the participants to choose a pseudonym for themselves. I provided a pseudonym for them if they so wished. I did not collect any identifying information and requested participants avoid using the real names of third parties, as much as possible. In cases where identifying information was accidentally revealed in the interviews and captured in the audio-recording, these details were redacted from the transcripts. I audio-recorded the interviews on an audio recorder. After the interviews, I transferred and stored the audio files on a secure OneDrive folder managed by QUT. The audio files and the transcripts were identified using pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. I deleted all contact details and correspondence (WhatsApp numbers, chats or emails) after fourteen days of the interview, to further protect participant privacy and increase anonymity, and so that participants could not be reidentified.

### **3.4.2 Managing the risk of distress during interviews**

Before the start of the interviews, I mentioned to all participants that some of the conversations can be potentially triggering for them. I reiterated to them the options of skipping questions, taking breaks, rescheduling, or withdrawing from the interview at any point. I additionally asked everyone if they wanted to use a different strategy to manage their distress, and followed their lead, in case they had an alternative strategy. I also referred them to a list of queer-affirmative mental health practitioners mentioned in the participant information sheet that I had sent them beforehand, in case any participant needed to speak to a professional. At the end of the interviews, I also made sure that participants were relaxed and comfortable by checking in on their mental state and how were they feeling after the interview. Most



participants responded by saying that they felt relaxed and calm throughout the interview, despite revisiting traumatic incidents in their life: “I was so comfortable with it. That’s why I answered so well—not answered—*narrated* my story so well” (Tushar). Some participants mentioned not only lack of discomfort, but also a positive feeling that the interview conversation left on them. I have reproduced two quotes from participants illustrating this:

Yeah, I’m feeling okay, and the fact that somebody ... is utilising this—like, the kind of rambling that I’m doing—and like, I don’t know whether I’m making sense or not, but at least somebody is listening to me. That’s the most important thing. I think I feel cathartic (Suman)

I’m feeling actually better, because I’ve shared it with like somebody because I have never shared it with anybody like except for one, or, maybe a few people, I don’t remember. So yeah, I’m feeling relieved to be very frank. It was a revisit to whatever had happened. But definitely, I’m feeling better (Malik).

In addition to risk of distress to research participants, recent studies have also conceptualised researching sensitive topics as “emotion work”, which can result in vicarious trauma to researchers (Booth, 2011). Some studies have also acknowledged this risk specifically to qualitative researchers researching sensitive topics (Darra, 2008; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). As this research deals with criminal victimisation, I managed my risk of vicarious trauma by consulting and debriefing with my supervisory team periodically throughout the research process, including data collection, analysis, and write-up. Moreover, in consideration of the emotional labour involved, I spaced my interviews appropriately and kept a reflective journal for

embodied writing, in accordance with the literature on emotional labour in research (Booth, 2011; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; McCosker et al., 2001), to manage any emotional and physiological fatigue. However, as I had heard many accounts of gay dating platform-related crimes from friends and acquaintances (even before I had conceived of this project), I felt that I was subconsciously well-prepared to listen and talk about the kinds of crimes or harms that the participants narrated. Hence, the interviews did not feel like “emotion work” to me. In fact, when I received positive feedback from participants, I felt good about being able to create a non-judgmental and safe space for them to share their stories. However, during transcription of the interviews, I felt the incidents more viscerally, and deeply. Hence, I spaced the transcribing of the interviews appropriately, and kept debriefing with my supervisory team. These measures helped me manage my emotional fatigue considerably. Strangely, I felt a surge of emotions, which I cannot easily categorise into positive or negative, when I formally presented my preliminary codes to my supervisory team, something that I had not considered happening previously.

### **3.4.3 Reflexivity**

Reflexivity has been broadly defined as an exercise where a researcher is conscious and critical of how their own thoughts, actions and decisions shape how they research and how they see (Mason, 2002, p. 5). My personal positioning as a researcher, being part of the queer community, being a member of multiple Facebook support groups for LGBTQIA+ people in India, and also having experienced some forms of gay dating platform-related victimisation myself provide me with some prior insights into the phenomenon I set out to investigate. This position has its advantages and disadvantages, as has been outlined in the literature dealing with the “insider/outsider debate” in sociological research (Denzin, 1992). As argued by

Griffith, the insider knowledge of a social group is invaluable at the beginning of a research project and helps bring “an authenticity to the research that is almost impossible to reach from the outside” (Griffith, 1998, p. 375). However, Griffith (1998, p. 375) noted that researchers constantly move across social and conceptual boundaries, so one’s insider-outsider status keeps changing. Recognising these boundaries and this changing insider/outsider status is of vital importance. As this project is about victimisation experiences of people using gay dating platforms, my own life experiences as a user of some gay dating platforms, and as someone who experienced a crime on it, have given me some “insider knowledge” which is valuable to the project. However, not all the research participants’ experiences are congruent with my own. For example, my sexual and gender identity, age, caste, class, socio-economic background, and location of residence were not like every participant’s. Despite this non-congruence of participants’, an insider status of sorts enhances research by allowing researchers to build quick rapport and ask innovative questions that could sometimes be more challenging for an outsider (Innes, 2009, p. 461).

In my research, my “insider status” helped in building a good rapport with the participants quite quickly. Additionally, my insider status allowed me to be more sensitive to participants’ discomfort around labels. It was possible for me to avoid insisting that participants answer demographic-related questions (such as those about their gender identity), because my insider status allowed me to gain such information in subtler ways. I could, for instance, understand a participant’s pronouns by paying attention to their use of the gendered verb used in Hindi. Before starting my interviews, and sometimes after finishing the interviews, many participants asked me casual questions about Australia and the Australian gay culture. One participant

asked me “how is the dating scene there?” (Tushar) while another joked “how are the hot Aussie men? Do they all look like the Hemsworth brothers?” (Suman). These questions reflected a shared camaraderie centred around sexuality, race, nationality and migration. Answering questions like these helped create an atmosphere for a more friendly communication. Other times, it helped end the interviews on a lighter note, rather than a more abrupt or formal goodbye. Another example of insider knowledge relevant to my research related to asking participants’ sexual/gender identity and pronouns explicitly. Being from India, and having interacted with many community members all my life, I was aware that being asked about one’s sexual or gender identity or pronouns during informal conversations can sometimes throw some people off momentarily. As stated before, while many in India have comfortably taken up Western LGBTQIA+ identity labels, many are not comfortable with them (Boyce, 2007). So, unless disclosed on their own, I avoided asking people identity-related questions in the beginning of the interview. Towards the end of the interview, I asked participants about their gender and sexual identity. However, I reminded them that they can skip these questions if they like. While some participants mentioned their gender and sexual identity while introducing themselves, two participants decided to skip the questions about their sexual identity, and one participant said “I told you already”, which they had not said. These reveal people’s discomfort around such questions.

Before starting my interviews, I was quite apprehensive about the power relations between me and the research participants involved in my research. I was aware that I was a PhD researcher writing a thesis in English and being funded by a foreign University, which, given the social inequality in India, has elitist undertones. I was also conscious that my English education is directly linked to the life chances I

received because of my upper caste, middle-class and socio-economic positionality. I tried to reduce my project's elitist potential by conducting the interviews in all three languages that I speak (English, Hindi, Bengali), and not just in English. I was concerned about two additional issues involving power imbalances. The first related to victimisation experiences being stripped of their context to fit into the rigour of an academic thesis. I address this by presenting the feelings, thoughts, fears, hopes and aspirations of the participants authentically throughout the thesis. The second issue related to accessibility of the research (language or otherwise) for research participants (if they choose to read it) and other stakeholders. This was especially important, as historically as well as in contemporary times, queer people have been the subject of academic curiosity, resulting in many queer people feeling that their experiences are reduced to academic papers, which do not lead to any real change in their lives. One participant in my research, Suman, even said:

These research papers that people like you are writing, I think they should ... reach out to judiciary, they should reach out to law-making system. And at least this should be accessible, and it should have an impact on the legal system of India and not just for academic purposes. Because I think there is a huge gap between academia and our practicalities. So, when it comes to the lives of queer people, I see a lot of people are working with queer lives. And I am sure you would come up with a wonderful thesis. But these kinds of data should reach out to police as well...

In terms of effecting real change, I was transparent as to the practical outcomes of the project. During the verbal consent process, and in the participant information sheet, I mentioned that primarily this project will lead to a PhD thesis, and other publications, which might be taken up or relied on by further studies, all of which

might lead to real change in the long run, but that such change was difficult to predict. QUT also has an open access repository for all its research, called eprints. To ensure access to the thesis and its findings, I will make the QUT eprints link available on the project website, so that everyone associated with the project can see it. Moreover, I plan to disseminate anonymised research findings on LGBTQIA+ support pages on social media and with support workers who contributed to the project in accessible formats (short paragraphs or Instagram tiles) to increase the accessibility of the findings.

### **3.5 DATA ANALYSIS**

#### **3.5.1 Thematic analysis**

I undertook a thematic analysis of the interviews. Thematic analysis does not require the researcher to be committed to any particular epistemological or theoretical framework and therefore offers much-needed flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that can be of great benefit to an exploratory project like this (Stebbins, 2011, pp. 2–17). Thematic analysis helps identify, analyse, and report patterns of meaning within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

I followed the six phases of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). The first stage involved verbatim transcription of all verbal utterances during interviews. I did this with the help of a software program called “Otter”. I uploaded the recording onto Otter and went through the transcription, correcting and editing it throughout, before downloading the final transcripts as Microsoft Word (version 365) documents. A few of my transcripts were in Hindi (completely and partially), which I translated and transcribed simultaneously directly into Microsoft Word. These processes facilitated my own understanding and familiarity with the whole

data through reading and re-reading of the transcriptions (Riessman, 1993). This stage also involved taking notes of some initial ideas for coding.

The second stage in the data analysis is the generation of initial codes, which are the most basic element of the raw data that can be evaluated meaningfully (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2011). For this, I went through the data systematically, paying equal attention to the whole data set to find out interesting aspects, which formed the basis of later themes. I used a computer-assisted qualitative data software, “Quirkos”, to ensure systematic and rigorous coding and data analysis (see Andrade et al., 2022). The third phase involved the sorting of different codes and grouping different codes into overarching themes, which I then categorised into potential themes and sub-themes, some of which went on to become themes later. I used thematic maps (see Braun & Wilkinson, 2003) that were inbuilt in the interface of Quirkos, to visualise the themes and categorise them easily.

The next phase involved reviewing themes at two levels: coded extracts level and data set level. I reviewed the themes at both these levels to consider if they form a coherent pattern individually and also make sense in the context of the whole data set. Again, I used thematic maps to arrange the themes. The last phase of the process was that of defining and naming themes, which essentially involved refining the themes and sub-themes further and considering whether the individual themes connect appropriately to the larger story that the thesis is telling. It also involved naming the themes so that the reader understands their meaning and essence quickly. I followed an iterative process, and returned to the dataset intermittently throughout the analysis process to ensure deeper understanding and development of ideas and refinement of themes as suggested by previous literature (Caulfield & Hill, 2018; Roulston, 2013). I used these themes and extracts from the data to compellingly

illustrate the analytic story (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the experiences of victimisation facilitated through gay dating platforms in India.

### **3.5.2 ANT Analysis: Using Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as a method**

In addition to thematic analysis, I have also used the methodological tools of Actor-Network (ANT) in the first two analysis chapters. I used this to compliment the individual forms of victimisation that emerged as themes from the interviews. As mentioned previously, in an ANT worldview, all meaning-making is possible because of interactions between different actants (both humans and non-humans) (Latour, 2009). Hence, ANT stresses upon relational materiality, a concept that “presupposes that all entities achieve significance in relation to others” (Crawford, 2005, p. 2). According to ANT, any phenomenon can be conceptualised as a network, where different actants interact with and co-shape each other’s behaviours. It is through these interactions that a network is formed. However, all the heterogeneous actants, and their interactions within a network, remain invisible and work together as a unit, unless the network experiences break down, a phenomenon termed as reversible black-boxing (Latour, 1994). For example, it is only when perpetrators start catfishing other on dating platforms (breaking down the intended script of the dating platform script and starting a new script of catfishing), do we realise that dating platform related interactions put a lot of unverified trust on profile pictures and pictures shared during chats. As such, the role of pictures as a mediator in dating platform-related interactions become clear. An ANT analysis opens the backboxes of networks to locate important mediating actants in a phenomenon. I discuss the methods I follow for an ANT analysis below.



### *ANT analysis methods*

Three concrete approaches to undertaking an ANT analysis have been suggested in the literature on cybercrimes: “following the tool”, “following the hybrid” and “following the network” (Van der Wagen, 2019). The “follow the tool” approach involves being attentive to the ways in which tools (like gay dating platforms) co-shape criminal (or abusive) practices in terms of “enabling, disrupting, inviting and so on” (Van der Wagen, 2019, p. 160). Such a method allows for discovering what “tools [technology] concretely *do* in a crime event”. The second approach, “following the hybrid”, urges researchers to not just look at the tool/machine but also how “human and non-human entities mutually shape one another’s actions by taking the invitational properties of objects into account” (Van der Wagen, 2019, p. 161). The third possible approach for an ANT analysis, “following the network”, urges researchers to map out all the possible actants in a phenomenon; humans, and non-humans alike. As this can be limitless, and Van der Wagen (2019) asks researchers to pay attention to those actors who are the mediators of the phenomenon under study.

In this research, I use all three of these approaches to ANT analysis at different points. These methods helped uncover the unique and peculiar ways in which gay dating platforms (and their affordances) interact with human-users and offenders to invite, enable, shape and produce gay dating platform-related victimisation. Moreover, they also helped me locate unique socio-political non-corporeal actants that play a mediating role in causing victimisation and other NCAs that impact help-seeking after victimisation.

Each of these approaches share several similar analytical steps:

The first step was to consider the phenomenon as a network. I conceptualised the phenomenon of interest (i.e. the particular kind of gay dating platform-related victimisation) as an ANT network, which is brought into being by the assemblage of heterogeneous actants. In Chapters 4 and 5, I conceptualised each form of victimisation as an ANT network, and in Chapter 6, I considered help-seeking as an ANT network as well.

When “following the tool”, the focus then becomes *the mediating role that the technology (gay dating platforms) played* in each form of victimisation. Specifically, this entailed *paying attention to what gay dating platforms urged or invited users to do*, and how those invitations contributed to victimisation.

A “follow the hybrid” approach was used when following the tool did not furnish any clear mediating actant that can be targeted to prevent victimisation. For example, in the network of blackmail, the tool (gay dating platform) is one of the actants, but the hybrid erotic being (constructed by the assemblage of profile pictures, erotic chats and nude imagery) is the specific actant that is exploited by a blackmailer. Such conceptualisation allows for more in-depth understanding of the victimisation, paving the way for newer ways of thinking about preventing such victimisation. When *following the hybrid*, the focus becomes *the unique role played by the hybridity of technology (dating platforms) and humans (users)*.<sup>11</sup> As Lupton (2019) suggested in this context, this approach requires “reading the transcripts, looking for the affordances, affective forces and relational connections in the participants’ accounts...and how these elements generated agential capacities” (Lupton, 2019, p. 133). Taking this approach allowed for an identification of the

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<sup>11</sup> Because things were working as expected, it is difficult to just to just the tool. That is why it is important to follow the hybrids.

ways that gay dating platforms (and their affordances) and humans co-shaped each other's behaviours.

Finally, when "following the network", the focus becomes the *identification of individual key actants in the network that play a key mediating role in causing, making, or sustaining the network*. I followed this method in Chapters 5 and 6 to highlight the mediating roles played by the socio-political non-corporeal actants of queerphobia, sex-negativity, shame, and disgust. I did this by reading the transcripts to identify those actants that uniquely shaped the phenomena of interest. In chapter 5, I specifically sought out those actants unique to the context of gay dating platform-related interactions, without which the network of victimisation would not have been sustainable. Similarly, in Chapter 6, I looked for those actants whose existence led to secondary victimisation of participants, and without which help-seeking would have been easier.

### **3.6 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

The exploratory nature of the study imposes several limitations on the project. One limitation relates to the data and recruitment strategies utilised. I have used Grindr and Facebook as media for recruitment. This was because of their popularity and large-scale use. However, some people might have stopped using gay dating platforms after their victimisation experiences, which means that their perspectives have not been able to be captured in my project. As this project is an exploratory study in a new field/topic of research, it relies more on flexibility and open mindedness. It is important that more studies (both exploratory and confirmatory) in this field are undertaken to strengthen and confirm the findings of this project. Such future directions will be outlined in the last chapter. Lastly, as mentioned before, a comprehensive ANT map, discoverable by "following the network" (Van der

Wagen, 2019) for each form of victimisation would help bring new actants to light. That, however, would require a case study method, and would require more in-depth data around individual incidents of victimisation. Instead, in this thesis, I focused on and highlighted the role of those actants that underscore gay dating platform-related interactions more broadly, and which feature across the multiple types of gay dating platform-related victimisation that were discussed by participants in this study.

### **3.7 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I explained the methods that I followed in this project in order to answer the research questions. I argued that, owing to the limited extant literature on the victimisation experiences of people using gay dating platforms in India, an exploratory approach was most suitable for this study. Moreover, I discussed that as this study was about people's experiences, a qualitative study would allow those experiences to be captured most comprehensively. After discussing recruitment strategies and sampling techniques used in the project, I discussed the ethical issues, and how these were managed throughout the study. Next, I detailed the data analysis methods used in this study. I used both thematic analysis and ANT analysis to not only present the victimisation experiences, but also illustrate the unique roles that the platforms and socio-political factors play in enabling victimisation in a digital society. I concluded the chapter by mentioning the limitations of this project. In the next two chapters, I present the victimisation experiences of users of gay dating platforms in India.

## Chapter 4: Victimisation experienced before meeting someone in-person

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This chapter is the first of two that answer the first research question (RQ1): What forms of victimisation are experienced by the users of gay dating platforms in India, and in what contexts do they occur? I answer this question by reporting on the victimisation narratives thematically in this chapter and the next. In this chapter, I specifically discuss the forms of victimisation that participants experienced before meeting another user (perpetrator) in-person. These forms of victimisation include exclusionary and discriminatory practices, violation of privacy, blackmail, romance fraud, and catfishing. I employ an ANT approach to explicitly illustrate the “networked” nature of victimisation: how multiple actors (both humans and non-humans) align with each other to produce victimisation (see Hinduja, 2012; Van der Wagen, 2019). This conceptualisation allows me to explicitly highlight the role played by gay dating platforms (and their affordances) in each of these forms of victimisation.

Dating platform-enabled interactions happen broadly in three phases: (1) when composing and viewing profiles, (2) when chatting online, and (3) when meeting in person (Brown et al., 2005; Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz, 2018). Crime and harms also occur at each stage of these interactions. In this chapter and the next, I have organised the victimisation experiences discovered in my interviews sequentially according to these phases (and sub-phases) of dating platform-related interactions. However, it is important to mention that the phases of these interactions are not

always linear or sequential.<sup>12</sup> For example, users can change their profile pictures or biographies multiple times during their use of a dating platform. So, composing a profile is not necessarily phase 1 all the time. Similarly, users may go on to meet people in the physical world and then resume an online communication using the chat interface of the dating platform. It is thus important to appreciate that, placing victimisation experiences under a concrete phase of dating interaction (like composing profiles or chatting online) can sometimes be impossible. However, I have housed the victimisation experiences under various phases of interaction to help anchor them to the interactions between the dating platform and the user.

Additionally, this strategy helps present the victimisation narratives in a somewhat systematic way, although it is important to acknowledge that the victimisation experiences do not maintain clear boundaries, and sometimes materialise across the three phases of interactions.

#### **4.1 VICTIMISATION EXPERIENCED DURING PHASE 1: COMPOSING AND VIEWING PROFILES**

This phase of interaction, as its name suggests, revolves less around interaction among users, and more around interaction between a user and the platform. It consists of two stages: (a) interaction with the platform while setting up a profile and (b) browsing through (looking at, reading) other profiles. Participants reported that some of the victimisation they experienced occurred at both these stages. The first victimisation experience that I discuss under this phase are experiences with

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<sup>12</sup> Moreover, none of the phases (and sub-phases) are purely cyber or real-world in nature. Hence, I do not conceptualise these phases as online or offline, but merely as broad stages that typical dating platform-related interactions go through. Each of these phases have both online and offline elements.

exclusionary and discriminatory practices. Secondly, I discuss “violation of privacy” as a class of victimisation that users can also experience at this phase.

#### **4.1.1 Exclusionary and discriminatory practices**

As mentioned previously, the first phase of dating platform interactions involves browsing the platform, which largely involves looking at other profiles and getting an idea of the digital culture of the dating platform: the photos and biographies (“about me”) and expectations (“looking for”) that other user-profiles consist of. It is at this phase that users encounter exclusionary phrases in others’ profiles, privileging only certain forms of sexual/erotic capital, for example in the form of masculine gender expression (or the social understanding of it), youth, economic class and other physical attributes like muscularity (see Khubchandani, 2019, p. 50; Sharma & Samanta, 2020, p. 370).

In the present study, Support worker 1 (SW1) asserted that “people discriminating based on gender, sexuality, looks, race, or ethnicity are ...very much prevalent on dating [platforms]”. Another research participant, Karan, explained when he came across profiles that explicitly mentioned exclusionary phrases, it led to “mental harassment...[and] mental trauma.... because rejections from the same community people, based on ...looks [or]...living standards can...lead to depression”. Karan provided a specific example of exclusion he experienced:

I cannot stop ageing, right? So when I see people are looking for teens, and then they specifically say [on their profiles] “I am into teens only”, it definitely impacts my thought process—is it my fault I am getting old?

Karan felt that people can have different choices in a partner, but “there has to be a proper channel to communicate or to express your feelings about it, you cannot demean certain people”.

#### 4.1.2 Violation of privacy

The next victimisation type that emerged from the interviews that falls under this stage of composing and viewing profiles can be broadly referred to as violation of privacy. These harms revolve around malicious disclosure of private and sensitive data which forms an integral part of the profiles. There is some evidence in literature from India on violation of privacy in the form of outing, identity theft, and sexuality and sexual-behaviour related defamation (see Birnholtz et al., 2020). Sometimes, the defamation is carried out by news channels too (see Singh, 2018; Sinha-Roy & Ball, 2021; Steinfeld, 2020). Each of these forms of abuse has its own unique set of motives and rewards. While defamation can be carried out with the sole intent of harming the user, “identity theft” might have other motives beyond just harming the user. For example, gossip might be a major motive for some perpetrators outing someone’s sexuality or HIV serostatus. In the present study, Support worker 1 (SW1) explained “violation of privacy” in the form of HIV serostatus related data:

...violation of privacy happens a lot on online dating apps. If I am HIV positive, and people come to know about it, it becomes a gossip matter for them, where without my consent, people disclose my HIV status within the community. This is also a very bad situation, which violates my right to privacy as well as violates the stipulations of the *HIV Act [ , 2017]*.

According to the *HIV Act, 2017* [HIV] status should not be [disclosed] without my consent.

In this section, I employ an ANT method of analysis to explain the factors at play in both the above forms of victimisation. Firstly, I used “follow the hybrid” method to uncover the actants (factors) in the network of exclusionary and discriminatory practices. I discovered three main actants in the network: (a) humans;



(b) dating platforms; and (c) neoliberal standards of beauty, like, desirability of white skin, muscularity leading to a sexual hierarchy (Callander et al., 2016; Conner, 2018). The standards of beauty that appear here have been conceptualised as neoliberal because bodies considered desirable are a product neoliberal values of self-care, expedient lifestyle and professional success (Sharma & Samanta, 2020), Self-care and fitness have taken up a lot of traction among the middle-class of India, as a form of socio-cultural capital (Baas, 2016). Moreover, neoliberal values of ‘personal preference’ and autonomy, which are used to justify exclusion and discrimination, work to obfuscate the racist, classist or ableist undertones of such standards (Robinson, 2015; see also Holland, 2012). In India, standards of beauty are also caste and region dependent. This is seen in the desire for light skin tones (colourism) (Hall & Mishra, 2021; Paul, 2016) and perceiving men of specific regions as more muscular/masculine/desirable (see Baas, 2020; 2022). For gay dating platform-related discrimination and exclusion, it is important to note that neither the humans, (neoliberal, classed, caste, and region-ed) standards of beauty, nor the platforms cause the victimisation experience described above on their own. All three elements need to assemble with each other to create the phenomenon of discrimination and exclusion on gay dating platforms.

Gay dating platforms create (prescribe and afford) a permissive culture that *invites* and affords uninhibited language around what people desire (and despise). If we pay attention to the invitational properties of gay dating platforms, their hidden role in the network becomes clearer. Some gay dating platforms directly invite users to fill in their height, age, weight, and body type (see for example, Grindr, n.d.-b) which reify neoliberal standards of beauty. These are direct inscriptions in the dating platforms that prioritise physical attributes, indirectly programming what to desire

(and not desire) and offering the technological means to filter out profiles based on such physical attributes (see Grindr, n.d.-b).

This intended program of action of the technology could have been benign, if hierarchisation of desire on the lines of race, class or even masculinity in society was not a reality. However, hierarchisation of desire among the queer population is a social reality (see Green, 2013; Ruez, 2017). In a digital context, this hierarchisation not only persists but *translates* (amplifies) and becomes a concrete reality in the form of phrases like “no fats, no fems, no Asians” on countless profile descriptions, for example (Conner, 2018, 2022; Farris et al., 2020; Sharma & Samanta, 2020).

Additionally, the lower inhibitions among people on the internet, termed as the “online disinhibition effect” (Suler, 2004) adds to the bluntness of the phrases used on gay dating platforms. Further, the “perpetual contact” (Katz & Aakhus, 2002) of users with the platforms via an internet-connected smartphone amplify the negative effect of these prejudices on users. Cumulatively, the assemblage of sexual hierarchy in society with gay dating platforms makes the technology’s “program of action” (who/what/how to desire) discriminatory. This discussion highlights that in addition to humans, technology as well as sexual hierarchy present in society are all equally responsible for causing and sustaining exclusionary and discriminatory practices on gay dating platforms.

Similarly, “violation of privacy” is a direct product of what gay dating platforms *invite* users to do. I “follow the tool” method here to posit that if not for the gay dating platform’s unique invitations and affordances, the possibility of “violation of privacy” would not arise. The dating platform invites a user to make a profile. Composing profiles involves responding to the prompts of the platform while setting up an account. In ANT terminology, these prompts (or *inscriptions* in the software)

are prescriptive messages (invitations to act) and can range from “upload a profile photo” or “write a name” or “attach social media handles” or fill out “HIV status” or “sexual identity”, “gender identity” and others (Grindr, n.d.-b). Of course, these are merely invitations, and not injunctions, and depending on the platform and what the users want, users can choose to ignore some of these invitational prompts.

Nevertheless, users who choose to answer the invitations follow the intended *script* of the platform and create a profile consisting of their photos, HIV status, sexual and gender identity, expectations (by choosing the relevant “looking for” fields on a dating platform, like “chatting” or “networking” or sex), sexual roles they are willing to play (by choosing a role from the list of roles prescribed on the platform), among others. It is this profile along with its constituents (pictures, HIV status, sexual role), composed by following the technological prescriptions of the platform, that render users visible as a distinct digital entity. It is this digital entity that can be captured and shared with others, feeding into gossip or aiding in defamation. Hence, the intended *script* of profile-making on gay dating platforms renders queer individuals digitally visible, and vulnerable to “violation of privacy”. Hence, clearly, gay dating platforms play a more active role in the network of “violation of privacy” by inviting the creation of profiles in specific ways, along with the technology for capturing that digital entity, like screen capturing and screen recording.

Importantly, each case of “violation of privacy” is different and has its own set of actants and motivations. Perpetrator motivations can include defamation (as was the case with SW1) or identity theft (see Birnholtz et al., 2020). One form of violation of privacy is blackmailing with threats of outing. I discuss this specific example of “violation of privacy” below to highlight the unique set of actants in

those contexts. However, before doing so, I provide a brief overview of the chatting phase itself.

## **4.2 VICTIMISATION EXPERIENCED DURING PHASE 2: CHATTING**

The second phase of dating platform interactions involves interactions with other profiles, primarily using a chat feature. These interactions have been conceptualised as “digital encounters”, which mostly follow a script: either sexual or social (Maliepaard & Lisdonk, 2019, p. 142). Sexual scripts are mostly focused (and less organic than a meeting at a gay bar, for instance) interactions geared towards physical meeting for a hookup (Miles, 2019). They follow a crisp and short sexual script. Sometimes, sexual scripts can also be a little longer temporally. Social scripts, on the other hand, are more laid back, slower in tempo, and focus more on socialising than immediately focusing on sex (Maliepaard & Lisdonk, 2019). However, online interactions are not neatly divided into sexual or social scripts, and, sometimes, have elements of both, and hence scripts can be socio-sexual as well. I discuss two types of victimisation that occur in this phase of interaction: blackmail and romance fraud.

### **4.2.1 Blackmail**

As indicated in the previous section, blackmailing typically involves a threat to disclose sensitive information like HIV serostatus, chat conversations, sexuality or even the fact that someone uses a gay dating platform to one’s family, workplace or on social media. Threats are typically followed by demands for money or sexual favours (see Birnholtz et al., 2020). It is important to mention here that all blackmailing incidents involve “violation of privacy”. Boishakh, a student at a Government University in Kolkata who stayed in the University hostel, narrated his

personal experience with blackmail. He spoke of chatting (socio-sexual) with one person for a few weeks, who then started blackmailing him quite suddenly.

I came across this [profile] on Grindr without a photo. He claimed to be a junior of my college and shared some pics - face pictures. I didn't recognise him, but I decided to talk and to know about him. So [after chatting] for one to two weeks, suddenly this guy took on [a] weird behaviour – [saying] that I should be paying for his books, and other [college related] expenses, and I was like, “Why? I don't know you. You haven't met me yet. And anyway, I'm not liable to pay for whatever expenses you have”. We had exchanged pictures of many nudes, so he blackmailed me [by] saying that whatever conversation we had, he has a screenshot of the whole conversation. And if I do not listen to whatever he asks for, he will make those go “viral” and tell my friends and college authorities. Given that 377 [the law which criminalised ‘gay sex’ in India] was prevailing at that point of time, so it was a really scary thought to think about.

I first use “follow the tool” method to identify the role played by the gay dating platforms in this victimisation. Nude imagery is a major actant in the *network* of blackmail. Sharing nude imagery and erotic texting (sexting) is written into the design of gay dating platforms. Digital interaction on many gay dating platforms especially affords, invites and enables sharing nude images of oneself. This is because “nude pic[ture]s make online dating...more real, more intense, and more horny” (Maliepaard & Lisdonk, 2019, p. 147). This is true both for the sharer and the recipient, as it feeds the exhibitionism/narcissism of the sharer as well as voyeurism of the recipient of the image (see Mowlabocus, 2010; Phillips, 2015). Hence, they generate real affect- desire or excitement (and sometimes disgust or indifference)

(see Maliepaard & Lisdonk, 2019) during sexting. In addition to the erotic nature of it, the sharing of nudes is probable during chats on dating platforms, because nude image-exchange makes the possibility of a hookup in the physical world more real or more imaginable. This is sometimes because only after scrutinising the naked bodies of other human users, made possible through the exchange of nude pictures, would a human-user decide if they are attracted to the picture-sharer enough to meet physically for a date or a hookup – an interaction unique to online dating (Phillips, 2015, p. 72). Sharing and viewing naked pictures, in such cases, is one step towards the possibility of a hookup in the physical world. Nude images thus shared, however, become a currency for exploitation at the hands of a blackmailer, as illustrated in Boishakh's narrative. Hence, nude imagery, afforded by the design and enabled by the culture of gay dating platforms, is a major actant in the *network* of blackmail.

I now move on to “following the hybrid” to trace the assemblages that lead to the “success” of this victimisation (blackmail) network. Nude imagery and erotic texts (sexts) assemble with several actants like the permanent and shareable nature of digital images to create the network of blackmail. This assemblage of private erotic chats and sexual imagery shared during private chats (sexting) along with profile pictures create a “hybrid erotic being” (part human, part machine) of queer desire. This digital being of queer desire is permanent and shareable, owing to other technological affordances like screen capture or screenshot or “email chat data” (Romeo, n.d.-a). This is markedly different from erotic interactions that do not involve a dating platform, which are less easy to capture or document and share. This permanence and the shareable nature of the “hybrid erotic being”, illustrated by Boishakh's “he will make it go viral” are other important actants in the network of blackmail. “Virality” is also a cultural trend afforded by the extensive reach of digital

society (Powell et al., 2018, p. 26). This unique assemblage is what makes the network of blackmailing possible. This victimisation 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.

In acknowledgment of and response to this, some platforms, like Blued and Grindr, have introduced an “album”, which can be unshared when needed, a feature that makes it harder for people to store others’ nude imagery (Grindr, n.d.-a). Similarly, Romeo has a “quickshare album” feature, for sharing one’s “special private album” for sixty minutes with another user (Romeo, n.d.-b). In spite of these measures, users remain vulnerable because of the other elements of the assemblage: profiles themselves, erotic chats, profile photos. Other sensitive information on a dating profile is another actant in this assemblage, which I discuss next.

Knowledge of sensitive personal information, like residence or workplace are other important actants in the network of blackmail. In Boishakh’s narrative, for example, the perpetrator knew where Boishakh lived, where he went to college, and who his college authorities were. In his threats, he mentioned outing Boishakh at all these places. This demonstrates that blackmailers exploit their knowledge of a user’s sensitive personal information. Features of dating platforms, like geolocate features, might allow for perpetrators to gather such information. Some dating platforms have features that can blur/mask the exact location of a user on a dating platform (see, for example, Blackwell et al., 2015), which has the potential of destabilising this network and changing one’s experience of this victimisation. However, approximate locations can still be determined. In Grindr, for example, even for users who have chosen to deselect the “show my distance” feature, their

approximate distance, correct up to 100 meters, can be determined (Grindr, n.d.-c). This is especially contentious when someone uses the platform in a big organisation campus or a college hostel or campus (Boishakh's case, for instance). In such cases, their privacy may still be compromised. Moreover, in India, where neighbourhoods are quite tight-knit and familiar (see Abraham, 2018), the chances that someone might be identified are higher. As Boishakh's narrative illustrated, such knowledge can be exploited to aid in blackmail. Hence, in ANT terms, personal information is an important actant in the network of blackmail.

In addition to the geolocative feature, people also rapidly disclose personal information during chats. This culture of rapid and oversharing information (Agger, 2012) and quick relationship formation (see Ben-Ze'ev, 2009) during chats on gay dating platforms is another actant in the network of blackmail. SW1 recounted typical blackmailing incidents coming to her organisation, and provided an overview of typical blackmailing cases and the propensity of users to disclose personal information quickly while chatting on a dating platform:

while you are chatting with some person online, you tend to give your personal information over few days—you gain trust over that person and you share your personal information - contact number, address, where you work. And because of that personal information, that another person [gets] to blackmail you.

To conclude, blackmail in this context is made possible, and sustained, by several important actants. I illustrated that nude imagery, erotic chats, screen capturing technology, profile pictures, and personal information like workplace or residence knowable through geolocative functionality or chat interactions are all important actants that assemble to create this victimisation network. In the next



section, I discuss another form of abuse that dating platform users experience during the chatting phase: romance frauds.

#### **4.2.2 Romance fraud**

As mentioned before, romance frauds involve the development of a fictitious relationship online, with the sole motive of financial gain on the part of the offender (Cross, 2020). Although most romance frauds are initiated on digital platforms, including dating platforms, they can occur across online-offline environments (Cross et al., 2018). In the present study, Aranyak, who works in the government in Delhi, described his experience with romance fraud. I describe Aranyak's story below.

Aranyak described receiving a message on Grindr from a “guy residing in the US”, and although he had some initial apprehensions about receiving a message from someone so far away, after some initial verification on social media, he decided to get to know them. They chatted for some days on Instagram, and eventually shared WhatsApp numbers. The next part of Aranyak's story can be thought of as a grooming phase. Aranyak experienced building trust and furthering romance in this phase:

For around 15-20 days, it was very nice. We were very comfortable with each other. Sometimes when, for one day, he didn't text me, the next day he apologised to me...and I really respected that gesture of his. Moreover we talked about our future prospects also... he gave me hopes that one day of course we will be together. So, of course people dream, no? I also had the dream that “I will have my—this will be my guy, we'll live happily ever after”...[.] So sharing of heart emojis became a daily business [and] things were very romantic. Actually, we never talked about getting physical or these things, so that was somewhat very pure relation, you can say. We only

talked about being together [and] I was getting very positive vibes from his side.

The next phase of the fraud started when the perpetrator informed Aranyak that he wanted to come to India to meet him. This can be conceptualised as a build up to the “sting”. Aranyak’s perpetrator went to great lengths to convince Aranyak of the fact that he is actually taking the trip: “...he shared a pic in which the luggage was there, and with the caption ‘See? I’m ready for it’...and then he sent me [pictures of his] tickets also”, all of which contributed towards trust-building for Aranyak.

Finally, Aranyak experienced the sting on the day of the perpetrator’s scheduled arrival. He received a text from “the guy” saying he was being held by authorities at the airport. Soon, Aranyak received a call from an Indian number who claimed to be an immigration officer informing him that his “friend” had entered India with “94 lakh rupees of cash, and that is not legal. Moreover, he has to get a yellow card to enter the country. And that will cost him around 47,000 rupees. His credit and debit cards are not working”. When Aranyak asked if there is any way out, they asked him to transfer 47,000 INR to a bank account to pay for his “friend’s yellow card”. Although Aranyak thought for a second that he should help “this guy” out by sending the money, another friend advised him against doing so. Heeding the advice, once Aranyak clearly communicated this to the person on the phone, they disconnected the phone. Soon, the perpetrator texted him and tried to guilt him along the lines of “I have come along to your country, and you are behaving like this”. When Aranyak made it clear that he is not transferring any money to anyone, he eventually stopped responding and deleted his number. So, Aranyak did not respond to the sting. Aranyak’s experience aligns with “scammers persuasive techniques model” as propounded by Whitty (2013).

All three support workers who I interviewed narrated similar cases coming to their organisations and emphasised how romance fraud is rising in India. Support worker 2 (SW2) said that he had heard instances and handled cases where scammers posing as immigration officers have asked for amounts ranging from 75,000 INR to 550,000 INR. Support worker 3 (SW3) speculated that these crimes are “a whole BPO [Business Process Outsourcing] setup or a call centre setup where there are constant backup calls, and people have letterheads, and receipts” – one that involves an organised group of people along the lines of the “Nigerian [sic.] format of scams”.

Romance frauds occur across countries and across many online dating platforms. As mentioned in the previous section, literature has discussed the ease of deception and the creation of faster hyper-personal relationships in online communications as facilitating romance frauds (Jiang et al., 2011; Markowitz & Hancock, 2018; Sharabi & Caughlin, 2019). In Aranyak’s case as well, there was ample deception, trust building and generation of feelings of love or intimacy exemplified by Aranyak’s feelings that “this will be my guy, we’ll live happily ever after”. Additionally, it is worth noting that romance frauds do not remain confined to the dating platform but span across multiple messaging platforms, as was illustrated in Aranyak’s story, where he recounted chatting with the perpetrator over Instagram and WhatsApp.

In ANT terms, romance frauds can be conceptualised as a network of various actants: offenders, groups of offenders, people who are targeted, dating platform profiles (including attractive pictures, biographies, backstories), fake social media accounts to increase the perceived genuineness of the scammer, periodic chat messages on separate messaging platforms to groom and develop a relationship in the platform users’ mind, tactical usage of photos to make the scammer and the

relationship appear genuine. Like every network, it has an infinite number of possible actants whose interrelations shape and stabilise the network. I explain the roles played by dating platforms and their unique assemblages with humans that play a role in this victimisation in the next section.

By using “follow the tool” method, it can be argued that dating platforms themselves are a major actant in the network of romance frauds, at least those perpetrated through dating platforms. Dating platforms present an available pool of people looking for love and willing to invest in someone for romantic purposes. They can be easily found by filtering the “looking for” section of the dating platforms to only display people who are looking for love. Moreover, in Aranyak’s story, his perpetrator messaged him from outside India. As dating platforms are global in terms of reach, it is easier for a scammer to target someone in a different country. This cross-country targeting enables many scammers to escape the law, due to the territorial sovereignty of countries and the lengthy and cumbersome process of pursuing such cases under international law (see Brenner, 2006). Hence, the platform affordances of relative invisibility, global reach and hyper-personal online relationships, all aid scammers in carrying out romance frauds effectively. Additionally, “follow the hybrid” method can be used to argue that while dating platforms *translate* into agents of romance and love when they assemble with users looking for love, they *translate* differently when they assemble with perpetrators. This also demonstrates the ANT argument that technological translations are unforeseeable and give rise to unpredictable outcomes – outcomes that were not conceived by the platform developers.

### **4.3 VICTIMISATION EXPERIENCED IN BOTH PHASE 2 AND PHASE 3**

As dating platform interactions progress, many are taken offline. This is the third stage of dating platform facilitated interaction where people meet in-person for dates, conversations, or sex (Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz, 2018). I discuss most of these types of victimisation in the next chapter. However, catfishing is one form of victimisation which cannot be clearly placed in one phase. Individuals become aware of being catfished in phase 3: meeting in-person. However, the victimisation begins much earlier, from the time a person comes across a catfisher's profile (as fake photographs in that profile are deceptive) and chats to them. Hence, catfishing appears across all three phases of dating platform-related interactions.

#### **4.3.1 Catfishing**

Catfishing, in the context of online dating, has been defined in the literature as creating and using false identities online to lure in other dating platform users for a range of reasons (see also Lauckner et al., 2019; McCosker et al., 2019), including for romance frauds (Cross, 2020; Whitty, 2015). During my interviews, five participants spoke about experiencing catfishing. In all the five cases, catfishing was only a part of another (bigger) crime/harm that the participants experienced. I have described those harms/crimes subsequently in Chapter 6. In this section, I have only focussed on the catfishing part of the victimisation. Suman and Malik wanted to leave as soon as they discovered the catfishing. They explained that upon meeting in-person, they realised they had been catfished and that they were not attracted to the people who had come to meet them. Kartik, despite being catfished and not feeling any attraction to the person, wanted to sit and chat a little with the person before leaving. Kartik explained the experience very vividly in the following words:

So I went [to the location], I waited for him for a long time...then I saw a guy suddenly crossing by me...I had my real pictures on my profile. A stranger guy that I've never seen, I've never met, and I've never talked to, he was passing by, and he asks "Are you Kartik?" I said, "Yeah". I asked him "Is xxx [redacted] you?" I think I said, in a very honest way that you don't look like your pictures: the person I saw and the person you is entirely different person altogether, which I don't know at all. He was very well spoken, but he was not the guy. And he was too ugly, to be honest. It was not the guy that I was expecting it to be. That's what I said. He started to reverse that thing on me stating that I don't look like my pictures as well. I was like, "Okay, then let's have a conversation and we'll go".

Karan, despite being catfished, decided to invite the person who catfished him to his house, as it was very cold and very late at night. When Karan met them outside his house, he realised that he had ben catfished, as they did not look anything like the photos shared on Grindr. Despite this, Karan decided "as part of humanity, as it was too cold outside, to let him in the house for some time, [thinking that] he can leave in the morning".

Ravi also experienced catfishing upon going to hook up with someone they met via Grindr. Upon seeing the person, Ravi realised that he has been catfished. Despite this, Ravi decided to stay and hook up with them, as he was very keen for a hookup:

I went at his place and the picture he showed me on the app and when I saw him, he was totally completely different. And at first I was shocked. And I asked him that the picture you showed are completely different [to how you look]. I showed the picture [he had shared] as well. He apologised. Then I

thought [I will] let it go and hook up with this guy, now that I [have come this far].

Catfishing is an affordance, culture, and harm unique to dating platforms (not just gay dating platforms). As stated before, catfishing was accompanied by other victimisation that the participants experienced, namely, sexual assault, extortion and violation of personal space, which are detailed in Chapter 5. Clearly, the perpetrators used catfishing to mask their real identities. This could be an additional safeguard to protect themselves from law enforcement, in case the participants decided to approach the police. Whatever the motivations of the perpetrators were, catfishing, as a practice, would not exist without dating platforms. Using “follow the tool” method, it can be posited that the technological affordance of being able to upload any picture without verification act as major actant in the network of catfishing.

Additionally, the online dating script makes pictures a key currency for users to identify, determine compatibility, and initiate conversations with someone (see Brown, Maycok & Burns, 2005). Using “follow the hybrid” method, we can assert that it is this feature of the script that is *translated* when the platforms assemble with catfishers. Using Van der Wagen’s (2019) “follow the tool” method, it can also be argued that these affordances also *translate* (change) humans: if not for these affordances, human users might not have thought of catfishing. Hence, users, motivations, technological affordances and dating platform scripts *assemble* to give rise to the network of catfishing.

In recognition of the same, some dating platforms such as Tinder and Bumble have introduced photo-verification features (see Bumble, n.d.; Sinha-Roy and Ball, 2022, pp. 58-59). These measures destabilise the network by taking away the technological affordance of being able to upload pictures that are not one’s own.

However, many platforms, including Tinder, have only made this optional. Similarly, the need for anonymity, especially for queer individuals in a predominantly hostile and queerphobic society like India, also makes it hard for platforms to make uploading profile pictures mandatory. As a result, catfishing continues to thrive as a form of victimisation in itself, or as a part of a more invasive crime. In all the cases discussed above involving catfishing, participants felt “shocked”, “betrayed”, or disappointed. As mentioned before, participants mentioned catfishing and deception as part of a more invasive crime that they faced, which I discuss in more detail in the next chapter.

#### **4.4 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I discussed five forms of victimisation that users experienced while being on a gay dating platform: exclusionary and discriminatory practices; violation of privacy; blackmail; romance fraud; and catfishing. Users experienced these forms of victimisation mainly across two phases of dating platform interactions: composing profiles; and chatting. One form of victimisation—catfishing—however, spanned across three phases of interactions: composing profiles; chatting; and meeting in-person. While discussing these individual kinds of victimisation, I also illustrated their “networked” nature: how both human and non-human actants assemble to create an ANT network for each type of victimisation. In all these forms of victimisation, the dating platforms play a pivotal role: if not for the dating platform (and one or more specific affordance of the platform), the victimisation would not have occurred. Such ANT theorisation, illustrating the specific roles of dating platform affordances in each type of victimisation, pushes us towards a post-human understanding of crimes and harms. In such a worldview, human offenders or wrongdoers are not solely responsible for victimisation—it is an



assemblage of human and non-human actants makes the victimisation possible. This discussion provided some answers to the first research question (RQ1): What forms of victimisation are experienced by the users of gay dating platforms in India, in what contexts do they occur, and what factors play a role in such victimisation?; I continue answering RQ1 in the next chapter, where I discuss experiences of victimisation that broadly transpire in phase 3 of dating platform interactions: meeting other users in-person.

## Chapter 5: Victimisation experienced after meeting someone in-person

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In this chapter, I discuss the forms of victimisation that participants experienced after physically meeting someone from a gay dating platform (Phase 3 of dating platform-related interactions). This chapter continues to answer the first research question (RQ1) and elucidates the types of gay dating platform-related victimisation recounted by participants, the contexts in which they took place and the major factors that played a role in causing it. I discuss six types of victimisation in this chapter: extortion; abduction; violation of private space along with assault; “friends with benefits” fraud; image-based sexual abuse and unwanted sex. I illustrate the diversity of contexts in which victimisation occurs; the unique factors that play a role in the victimisation; and the vulnerabilities of the users that perpetrators rely upon.

In this chapter, I use ANT to illustrate that in addition to the platforms (and their affordances), there are three more socio-political non-corporeal actants that play a major role in producing harm: structural queerphobia; sex-negativity; and family honour/reputation. Structural queerphobia can be understood as prejudice against queer people at institutional levels, including families, housing, neighbourhoods, workplaces, and the criminal justice system (see Lett et al., 2022; Rosenberg et al., 2021; Sinha-Roy & Ball, 2021) It differs from individual prejudicial beliefs, which are easier to locate and perhaps redress. Sex-negativity has been defined as “the idea that sexuality should be controlled through limiting education, services, and representation in public discourse [and] promotes shame and guilt in those who exercise personal autonomy.” (Ivanski & Kohut, 2017, p. 223). Hence, structural sex

negativity refers to institutional stigma against sexual pleasure: such as within families, housing societies, and the criminal justice system. The last actant in the network of gay dating platform-related victimisation that I discuss is family honour and shame. This is because Indian societies are group-based (see Weston, 2003), and stigma and “disrepute” affects not just an individual, but also their family and kin groups (Das & Goffman, 2013; Thompson et al., 2013). Hence, people participating in socially “transgressive” behaviour (like queer sexual behaviour) are anxious about causing harm to family honour. Although honour manifests differently in different regional contexts (urban, rural, suburban) in India and is caste, classed, and gendered (see Gupte, 2013), it broadly stands in opposition to queer sexual behaviour across all these contexts. In this thesis, I use honour in this broad sense. I conceptualise family honour as another socio-political non-corporeal ANT actant to illustrate that it causes and sustains gay dating platform-related victimisation.

Additionally, in describing image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) and unwanted sex, I illustrate the hybrid nature of these forms of victimisation, starting in the digital world on the dating platforms, and ending in the physical world, and sometimes moving back into the digital world. This allows me to build on the arguments of Digital Criminology for conceptualising crimes in digital societies as lying beyond the cyber versus real world binary (Stratton et al., 2017).

## **5.1 EXTORTION AND ATTEMPTS AT EXTORTION**

Extortion typically involves demanding money during or after meeting physically or hooking up. All three support workers spoke of typical extortion cases that they had encountered. Many participants also described their experiences with extortion and extortion attempts. Perpetrators used a variety of strategies to carry out extortions, including force, manipulation, and threats. In this section, I thematically

present the extortion experiences from my interviews based on the main strategies employed by the extortionists: extortion accompanied by assault (Suman, Kartik, Karan), intimidation (Nicks, Tushar), and threats to out the user (Venu, Anand). I describe each of these in turn. I then discuss, using ANT analysis, how socio-political non-corporeal actants play a role in the network of extortions.

### **5.1.1 Extortion with assault**

Suman and Kartik experienced extortion with assault. These incidents were also accompanied by catfishing by the perpetrators. Suman, who was new to Delhi, and a student at that time, lived in a rented house in Delhi. Suman chatted with a person close by on Grindr and decided to invite him home for a hookup. At the perpetrator's request, Suman met him in a busy market outdoors to bring him back to his house. When the perpetrator arrived, Suman realised that he had been catfished. He let the person know that he was not interested in him and wanted to leave the location immediately. The perpetrator stopped him and said, "if you don't want to meet me, then why did you even say yes to meeting in the first place?" Then he said, "pay my charges...check my profile. My profile says that I charge so and so amount of money". As Suman was not looking to buy sex, and as there was no conversation about doing so before, this statement was deceptive on the part of the extortionist. To prevent Suman from running away, he held Suman's shirt-collar very tightly and pinned one of Suman's feet under his own. The extortionist also grabbed Suman's spectacles, and as Suman had quite a high eye prescription, he could not see anything. The extortionist kept asking for money and asking Suman to speak to his broker, "who will decide what to do". Suman realised that he had been trapped and "started trembling and stammering". He "felt helpless" without his glasses. He "tried to shout, but [was unable to] because [he] was so afraid". Suman remembered that

“there were a lot of people around, but nobody was actually seeing what is happening here”, because, Suman thought, it was mistaken for a fight between friends, and not an extortion attempt by a stranger. Suman eventually freed himself from the extortionist’s grip, and “ran with [his] life and somehow and [managed to] reach home”. Suman remembered trembling and being unable to “tell anyone what had just happened”.

In contrast, Kartik felt that chatting to the person who was catfishing him would be less awkward than just leaving immediately. Kartik described sitting down and chatting with him for some time at a pizza restaurant in a shopping mall. Kartik recounted his perpetrator constantly asking about his home address and workplace (potentially to threaten him with outing at those places), which Kartik did not disclose. After chatting for some time, they decided to leave. On their way out of the mall, while they were crossing an isolated spot, Kartik was accosted by another person, who he soon realised to be the extortionist’s accomplice:

So there was a point where there was no shop, no people around, and suddenly a guy came from my back and he held my shoulder and said “*bahot ho gaya pizza, ab tu chal* [Enough of pizza, now come with us]”...[.] He was actually trying to overpower me, because he was nabbing my shoulder hard, with his fingers digging into my bones...

Kartik recounted being very nervous at first. Then he described thinking “either I be their slave [and follow through their demands], or I save [myself]—the choice is [mine]” and decided to resist the extortion attempt. As Kartik recounts:

...I said to him on his face, “*pehle to tu ye haath hata le* [first, you take your hands off me]”. And then I [verbally] abused him, I literally abused him because I didn’t know him, and he had the audacity to touch me...and ask

me certain questions that I'm not willing to answer...[.] So I said clearly "Shut the fuck up" and asked the other guy who I came with, "You tell me who is this guy and who you are, because I'm gonna be dialling the police, okay"? [With that threat], he told me "I'm a paid guy, he is my broker, and we were just about to take you out to a place and then, ask for a ransom money or something like that". I said, "run for your life, otherwise I'm gonna make your life hell".

Kartik added that while he never again came across the perpetrators, he heard that they had targeted other people using gay dating platforms in that locality and were eventually caught and charged by the police for robbing another person.

In both these cases, although the perpetrators did not explicitly threaten the participants with outing, the involvement of a dating platform, chats thereon and the mention of being "paid" through deception, creates the anxiety of potential outing. This anxiety alone can stop people from seeking help or resisting the extortion attempt. In addition to this anxiety, the use of force creates an even more hostile situation for the users of gay dating platforms and shapes their reactions or ability to ask for help.

Another way in which extortionists operated was by discreetly locking the gay dating platform user in their room or bathroom after sex and fleeing with their valuables. Although this is not strictly physical assault, it involves physical confinement of the user. Karan narrated his experience with such extortion by someone met via Grindr, where the perpetrator locked him in his bathroom from the outside and fled with his valuables. As discussed previously under "catfishing", Karan recounted chatting with the perpetrator on Grindr close to his house, and exchanging pictures on the chat platform. They decided to meet, and upon meeting

him, Karan realised that he had shared fake pictures, and he did not look anything like the photos shared on the app. Karan explained the events that led up to the incident:

... I was not very comfortable bringing him at my house. But honestly speaking, as part of humanity, you know, I thought it's too cold outside, so, I should let him in my house for some time, and maybe he can leave in the morning. So, you know, in the spur of the moment, I asked him to stay back, and in the spur of the moment, we had sex. And then when I was cleaning up in the washroom, he locked me from the outside. He took my laptop, and my phone and... whatever he found physically in front of him. So it was really horrid, and I was, I was completely shocked. I was staying with a straight guy that time and I couldn't do anything, other than yelling, and making a fake story in front of them what happened because I was not able to "come out" to him that time.

### **5.1.2 Extortion with intimidation**

Nicks and Tushar experienced extortion along with intimidation. In both their narratives, the extortionists had weapons, threatened them with assault, and robbed them. Nicks experienced a robbery incident in 2019. He hailed from Delhi and was living in a "tier three" city (a small town) in India for work in a multinational company. Nicks chatted with "a random guy" on Grindr, exchanged pictures, and invited him over for a hookup. Once he arrived, Nicks saw that he had not shared fake pictures, and looked exactly like the photos he had shared. So, Nicks "allowed him" inside his house. Like Suman's case above, the person that Nicks connected with expected payment for sex and falsely claimed that this was advertised on their profile. After an initial "a little bit hi, hello", Nicks invited him to have sex, upon

which the other person said, “will you pay me after sex or before sex?”. Nicks was stunned, and said “What are you saying? There was no such talk”. He replied “Look at my [Grindr] ID. It says I charge on 10,000 per trip”. With that “he started to unfold his drama. He quickly went to my main door and unlocked it. And then four of his accomplices walked in”. A robbery ensued, which lasted for 1-1.5 hours.

As Nicks recounted,

I was surrounded by five armed people in my house. They had a knife - one of them had a knife. And I was very confident another person had a gun. Even though he kept it in his pocket, but I could see he had a gun. So a physical fight was definitely out of [the] question. So I had no option but to surrender my cards, my cash. They withdrew money from ATM with my cards. My dad had gifted me a very expensive watch. It had emotional value. They took it...[.]They were like hungry for everything - they even took away a packet of chips I had in my kitchen and some juice tetra packs I had in my fridge. ... overall, this ordeal lasted 1-1.5 hours. It was horrific. And it was very bad. I counted my loss after they left. The financial loss was around 60,000 INR to 70,000 INR, if I count the cash value of everything I lost that day.

Tushar’s experience was slightly different. Tushar was a medical student at the time of the incident and was living in a rented apartment in Noida. This suggested that he (or his family) had enough disposable income to support his independent stay in the city, as most students would live in a student hostel or a shared accommodation. His perpetrator demanded money from him and threatened him with false prosecution (of being a drug user) and assault with a weapon. Having met on Grindr, they chatted for some time and Tushar found genuine photos on Instagram of



the perpetrator playing music at clubs, and therefore felt that he “was safe” and decided to invite him to his place for a hookup at around ten in the night. Tushar said that the first meeting was quite ordinary, and they “made out a little” and had “good conversations” as well. Tushar kept in touch with him, chatting with him regularly and eventually decided to meet a second time. They had sex, but Tushar remembered “not enjoying this time” and not knowing what to do. Tushar had to leave early the next morning for a friend’s wedding. When he mentioned this, the perpetrator responded by saying that Tushar “wasted his time and [said] that he gets paid offers for sex”, and that “he needs money for his sister’s marriage”. They slept that night, and when Tushar woke him up early next morning, and asked him to leave, he started threatening Tushar with physical assault and false prosecution. Tushar described:

He woke up and said to me “You don’t know who you have fucked with”. I was like “What the fuck!” He picked up the glass bottle and he started aiming at me. And I was like “what is this?” He was like “I have committed a murder yesterday. And I have committed two more murders before, I have been to prison as well. You don’t know who I am”. I was like “What the fuck! How is this [happening in the second meet]?” He was like “I will just turn on the location of my phone, I will tell the police, I have smack [colloquial term for heroin] in my bag, I will tell the police you take smack—I will surely go to jail, but I will take you with me, and you will pay for me whatever I will incur. I am always on the lookout for guys like you for this”.

Tushar felt “very scared” and remembered “literally begging in front of him” to let him go. Tushar somehow managed to distract him and run away. He explained that he made an excuse of needing some water, unlatched the door, and fled. Tushar

went to a safe place a little farther away from home. He called a few of his friends to ask for help, but they could not be reached. In the meantime, the extortionist started calling him. Tushar picked up his call and said, “I am going to police now, you don’t know my dad and this and that”, to which the perpetrator replied “Oh! I was only kidding! You took it seriously! You...just give me 10,000 INR, 20,000 INR” - he [even] came down to 5,000 INR”. Then, finally the perpetrator informed Tushar that he has left his place. Tushar returned home along with his colony security guard as he was not sure if the extortionist had left. Tushar had told the security person that “there was a thief in [his] house”. Upon entering his house, Tushar found that the perpetrator had indeed left, but had robbed everything from his home: laptop, laptop bag, clothes, shoes, face mask, speakers, watches and everything else he could carry. The next day, Tushar received a call from the perpetrator demanding more money. Tushar then blocked him on all platforms.

Nicks’ and Tushar’s stories illustrate the diversity in the contexts of the extortions. Although Nicks and Tushar were robbed in very different contexts, they both felt a sense of helplessness, that was connected to their sexual identity, reputation and queerphobia. Nicks held a high paying job in a multinational company and was living in a small town. His work position and his town of residence made it hard for him to resist the crime. Nicks elaborated:

If I [tried to resist the] crime, it would create a scene in the society and then the news will go public that I have been using a gay dating app. And I’m not out of closet publicly. So, it would cause, like havoc. And the disadvantage of being in a tier three city [small town] is news travels very fast in here, this will be the stuff of gossips, which will be carried on from one

generation to other, it would never go away. So it will cause me a lot of trouble.

Similarly, it was equally important for Tushar that he was not outed in his housing society, as that would result in him losing all respect in society. This was a crucial factor in his inability to resist the crime:

...if I would have shouted for help, then my identity would be disclosed, everything [sexual behaviour] would be disclosed, and...all the respect that I had maintained [in society] for so long would have been lost. (Tushar)

In the above quotes, Nicks and Tushar very clearly explained how important it was for them to not lose respect in society. Perpetrators rely on this vulnerability to victimise users of gay dating platforms. As indicated before, queer sexualities and sexual behaviour are seen by many in India in a negative light (Ranade et al., 2020; Sen et al., 2020). Additionally, any kind of sex happening outside the purview of marriage has considerable stigma attached to it (see Chakravarti, 2011; Das, 2014; Majumdar, 2018; Shukla, 2007; Sinha-Roy & Ball, 2022; Subaiya, 2008), let alone queer and anonymous or casual sex. This stigma deters many people from resisting the extortion attempt. So, they comply with the demands of extortionists, rather than approaching anyone for help. Tushar's thoughts that ran through his mind while he was fleeing his own home sum up the helplessness associated with this stigma very well: "I ran towards the guard room, but the first thing is that I can't tell anyone...how would I explain...no one will understand [empathise] unless the person is from the [queer] community". Hence, in these cases, perpetrators partially depended on societal queerphobia and sex-negativity and used force and intimidation to successfully carry out extortion.

### 5.1.3 Extortion with threats of outing in the neighbourhood

In contrast to the previous category of victimisation where perpetrators used force/intimidation to extort from people; in some cases, perpetrators explicitly threatened people with outing or creating a scene in the neighbourhood, which preys upon the vulnerabilities of the users of gay dating platforms in India. I discuss these cases in this section.

Venu and Anand experienced extortion where the extortionists intimidated them by creating a scene at their place, which led to their neighbours finding out about their queer sexual behaviour. Anand recounted meeting “a young lad” in Chennai through Grindr. Anand had a high paying job at that time and was living in a serviced apartment provided to him by his employer. They chatted for some time on the app, exchanged numbers, and met for “some fun” at Anand’s residence. After having sex, when Anand asked him to leave, the extortionist asked, “Where is the money?” which shocked Anand, as they had not spoken about any money. When Anand refused to pay him any money for sex, “he created a ruckus out there”. The extortionist also called an accomplice, who happened to be a hijra.<sup>13</sup> Anand was “terrified” and felt that the situation was “horrible”. So, he made up a story and asked his apartment manager for help. Anand invented the following story to tell his apartment manager:

I met this fellow in a mall. He is a student, was wanting some money and some help, so I told him to come over we can go out for dinner. That was an evening, around 8:30 p.m. - 9 p.m., and now that he’s here, I am telling him

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<sup>13</sup> As hijras are readily recognised as queer by people at large in Indian society, perhaps Anand felt more threatened about being outed by the accomplice’s presence.

to come with me to go for the dinner, and he's creating a ruckus that I am sexually exploiting him, and he's wanting money.

The manager intervened and was able to "handle the situation within about 20-25 minutes". The extortionist showed everyone their entire chat conversation on the dating platform as well as on WhatsApp. Anand said that because he had not shared anything explicit, he made up an excuse that the extortionist must have used Anand's Blackberry Pin or Instagram to create a fake identity to make up these chat conversations. Anand did not know how much of the story the manager believed, but he helped him get rid of the extortionist. The extortionist left, after Anand paid him 5,000 INR. Anand was okay with this, as he "did not want it to escalate to the police", especially because the apartment he was staying in was provided by his workplace, and it could jeopardise this arrangement or his employment. Anand was glad that the incident was not reported at his workplace, and that the building manager was helpful. Anand's story illustrates how queerphobia is deeply structural and runs across workplaces and housing.

Venu narrated meeting someone from Grindr and inviting them over to their residence for coffee. At that time, Venu, who hailed from Vizag, was working at a good private company in Bangalore, and was renting the top story of a two-storey house. The landowners lived on the ground floor. Once their hookup arrived, Venu felt deceived as they did not look like the photos they had shared on Grindr. Venu offered them coffee and wanted to chat. The extortionist, however, wanted to have sex and said, "I'm not interested in coffee, I came here to have sex". Venu was not interested in sex and did not know how to react, so they went to the bathroom to clear their head. When they came out, they saw that the extortionist had entered their bedroom, ruffled their bedsheet and scattered condoms on the bed and the floor. The

extortionist told Venu “take out your money now, since you called me over for sex. And you have to pay me money because you’ve had sex right now. If you refuse, I’ll create a lot of scene”. Venu tried to reason with them, explaining they did not have cash at home and would have to go to an ATM, and that they did not need to create a scene. Venu also messaged a few friends, who also advised them to reason with the extortionist. Somehow, Venu managed to bring them to the doorstep, when they “started shouting loudly”.

Venu’s landlady came upstairs hearing all the commotion. She seemed scared of the extortionist because of their non-conforming gender expression and started yelling at Venu: “get this person out of my house”. At that point, two police constables also arrived at their floor. They explained that the extortionist was riding a motorcycle without a number plate, so they were chasing them and found the motorcycle parked at Venu’s house. The constables asked what took Venu so long to send a stranger away and started inspecting Venu’s house along with the landlady. Venu felt humiliated and terrified and kept on explaining to them that he did not have sex with this person, and this was an entrapment. The police constables went on to humiliate Venu for a long time before letting them go, which I have discussed in Chapter 6 in detail. The extortionist just rode away, without any repercussions. That night, the landowners asked Venu to vacate the house within seven days.

In Anand’s and Venu’s stories, the technological affordance of “editing profile information” played an important role in the extortion, as extortionists changed their profile descriptions just before meeting to read “paid”, signifying that meeting them (casually/for sex) will require payment. Some extortionists also asked the users to check their profiles for verifying that they are indeed “paid”. Although this alone was not enough to make any participant pay the extortionists, it was used as an additional

measure to manipulate people into believing that they have consented to “paid sex”. There is considerable stigma attached to (male) sex work in general (see Biello et al., 2017) and particularly in India (see Shinde et al., 2009). There is also considerable secondary stigma attached to being associated with sex workers (Jain & Nyblade, 2012). This is in addition to the stigma around queer sex, discussed before. In both Anand’s and Venu’s narratives, the extortionists claiming to be sex workers showed their dating platform chats to anyone who tried to intervene. Their actions make it clear that perpetrators anticipate that people will not intervene when they come to know that there is some sort of transactional sex involved, making the demand for money justifiable.

All the extortion narratives mentioned above can be conceptualised as assemblages of a multitude of actants consisting of the perpetrators, the platforms (and their unique affordances like profile descriptions or chats) and socio-political non-corporeal actants (NCAs). I demonstrated in Chapter 4 that such a conceptualisation allows us to think beyond human actors when understanding victimisation or thinking about how to prevent harm. Similarly, in this section, I illustrate the roles played by two NCAs—queerphobia and sex negativity—in gay dating platform-related extortions, that I located by “following the network” (Van der Wagen, 2019). Across all the narratives mentioned above, queerphobia played a mediating role, whether explicitly or implicitly. Queerphobia played an explicit role in cases where perpetrators threatened people with outing (Venu, Anand) and an implicit role when perpetrators used physical force (Kartik, Suman), knowing that people will not resist or will hesitate to call for help because of queerphobia in society and the fear of being outed. In addition to queerphobia, sex-negativity is also a key NCA in the extortion cases. The presence of a stranger in one’s house, a facade

of sex created by scattering condoms (Venu), the perpetrator claiming to be a sex worker (Venu, Anand, Nicks, Suman, Kartik), and perpetrators having chat messages (or screenshots thereof) to prove agreement for sex (Anand's and Venu's narratives) all operate to make users anxious about other people finding out about their (queer) sex life. The perpetrators also partially depend upon structural sex-negativity that runs across Indian neighbourhoods, landowners, bystanders, and potential intervenors. These structural level actants exacerbate the impact of gay dating platform-related victimisation and create a vulnerability that perpetrators exploit. Venu's and Anand's narratives show how structural queerphobia and sex-negativity exacerbate gay dating platform-related victimisation.

## **5.2 ABDUCTION**

Some respondents spoke about abduction being another form of victimisation that they experienced. These experiences included being abducted and robbed, sometimes being held hostage for ransom, or sexual assault, and are sometimes motivated by queerphobic hate. SW3 spoke of an abduction incident in Bangalore from the early 2000s. In that incident, the perpetrators had abducted someone after calling them via a gay dating platform to a location under the pretext of a hookup. The perpetrators had demanded ransom money from the victim's friends and family after the abduction:

an extortionist had kidnapped somebody who was waiting for a person he wanted to hook up with...he was waiting at a spot, and the guy came in a van with three or four other people and basically blindfolded him, took him to some remote area, and, you know, contacted his friends or family, am not sure, and basically extorted as much as they could before releasing him. A



police case was filed, but I don't think they managed to catch the perpetrators.

Rajveer, from Faridabad, shared his personal experience with an abduction attempt. Rajveer explained that he met someone via Grindr and decided to meet him at around 9:30 p.m. at a specific location on a road. They agreed that the person would pick him up from there, go to his place for a hookup, and drop Rajveer back at this location. Rajveer rode his motorcycle to the location. The person arrived soon after in a car with another person. Rajveer was initially taken aback and enquired as to who the other person was. The person responded that "he is my friend, he will leave us at the location, and leave". Rajveer believed him, as this had occurred during previous hookups. So, Rajveer parked his motorcycle at the spot, and sat in their car to go to the person's place to hook up.

Rajveer described that he had sat on a phone that was lying on the passenger seat of the car. The person asked Rajveer to hand him that phone. As soon as he handed the phone to him, he held Rajveer's collar, started hitting him, and abusing him verbally using queerphobic slangs: "*Tum saalon ne duniya kharab kar rakhi hai, tum log aise ho* [You people have degenerated our society]". "Within nano-seconds" Rajveer realised what had happened: that "these were the wrong kind of people" and [he is] "kidnapped". Rajveer remembered the feeling explicitly and said "[he] will never forget that feeling all [his] life". He "felt...shattered" and thought "[he's] gone [doomed] now". "[He] didn't know if [he] would be able to rescue [him]self, [as] they were such big guys, [but he] kept thinking" of ways to save himself. Rajveer described the ensuing events as follows:

... I kept thinking "what do I do?" I think I am so crazy - whenever I used to watch a movie about someone getting kidnapped in a car, I would think

what would I do in this situation? I used to think I would jump out of the car. I literally did that. I opened the passenger door and jumped out of the moving car. I fell on the road. Luckily, I only received some minor injuries. So, now I got up, and I didn't look back, if they are following me, if they got out of their car, or anything. My main agenda was to rescue myself from there anyhow - all my things were scattered on the road: shoes, helmet, I was running barefoot on the road towards my [motorcycle]. I somehow reached my [motorcycle], put the keys in, I didn't know much about that location, I only wanted to flee from that place as soon as I could. I looked back, and I saw a car was coming towards me at full speed, I was "Shit! It's those guys, they will not leave me now". They stopped the car, got out and started coming towards me. I turned my bike and somehow fortunately was able to speed away from right in front of them.

Although Rajveer was able to speed away, the perpetrators pursued him in their car for a long time. Somehow, Rajveer managed to lose them, and eventually reached home. Rajveer recounted: "When I reached home, I took a deep breath [nervous laughter] and thought "Shit! It's over now". Eventually, Rajveer remembered that some time back, a friend had told Rajveer that a gang in that locality were "abducting gay men, robbing them, sexually assaulting them, and dumping them in near-death condition on the road". Upon remembering this, Rajveer realised that it was the same gang from the same locality and understood that they would have done the same with him, if he had not managed to escape.

Rajveer's story shows that sometimes perpetrators use brute force to rob, abduct or physically and sexually assault users of gay dating platforms. The perpetrators' use of queerphobic slang and phrases also show how perpetrators

appear to be motivated by using queerphobic rhetoric, and as such, overlap with queerphobic hate crimes. Rajveer's story suggests that queerphobia can be a more direct reason (and not a covert actant) for many forms of gay dating platform-related victimisation.

Rajveer further recounted constantly thinking about his family reputation while fleeing from the perpetrators. He explained:

... even if I had died, I would not have any regrets. But if they had caught me, my family's reputation would have been harmed like anything in the city... I honestly don't care about society, like obviously I would have gotten a lot of ridicule from society, but if my mom would have felt let down because of me, I would have felt terrible, I would have rather died.

In this narrative, "family honour" can be thought of as a key ANT actant in the network of abduction. As mentioned previously, family honour holds a major role in Indian societies (Gupte, 2013; Weston, 2003), and coupled with structural queerphobia and sex-negativity, becomes a key actant in many forms of gay dating platform-related victimisation. In the present case, Rajveer suggests that he would rather have died than be caught by the perpetrators simply because of the effect that this would have had on his family's reputation. Hence, family honour also shapes gay dating platform-related victimisation in unique ways. I now move on to the next form of victimisation, where perpetrators enter a user's private property for a date or hookup, and then refuse to leave.

### **5.3 VIOLATION OF PRIVATE SPACE WITH ASSAULT**

Two participants, Venu and Malik, described incidents where people they had met via gay dating platforms refused to leave their house and car, respectively,

leading to feelings of distress, helplessness, and peril. In Venu's experience, this also involved physical assault, whereas in Malik's case, verbal abuse was involved.

Venu described meeting someone via Grindr. They had chatted on Grindr for some time, Venu had checked his Facebook profile and had found one mutual "Facebook friend" as well. They decided to meet for a coffee date at a place close to Venu's house. This person did not arrive at the coffee shop and messaged later at night that he had gotten late and would like to come over to Venu's house. Venu felt a little perplexed, but agreed to it, and he came over to his place at around 1 a.m. As it was raining heavily and the person was drenched, Venu offered the person a towel and a change of clothes.

After some time, the perpetrator started "doing drugs" at his home. Venu said "No, you're not going to do it in my house. You're not allowed to do this". Venu explained the reasons for his refusal: "Why, I'm a healthcare professional, it just goes against all ethics that I have". Venu took the perpetrator's bag of drugs, went up to the terrace and flung it as far he could. As a result, the perpetrator "freaked out...he went mad...he went into some paranoia stage where he started to look for things and people in [Venu's] house". Venu realised that the person "might already be under the influence of some substance". He asked Venu to retrieve the bag and locked himself in Venu's bedroom. Venu explained that he cannot retrieve it because it has dropped next to a tiny landfill and is lost. Despite Venu's constant pleadings, he did not come out of his bedroom until after three hours.

In the meantime, Venu called his friends to ask for advice, who advised him to "wait it out" and keep them in the loop. Venu described feeling worried and scared: "I was so worried I was wondering what and there's something else like a side effect of whatever drugs he took. I don't know what he will do to himself". The perpetrator

came out of the bedroom at 5 a.m. in the morning, semi-naked, and asked for his bag again. When Venu repeated that he cannot retrieve it, he himself went to the terrace to look for it. Venu felt scared again: “God! It was so scary. Like I thought, what if he jumps off the terrace or something?”. In any case, after the perpetrator came back from the terrace after some time, they started arguing. In the middle of the argument, he assaulted Venu with a sharp object:

I don't know from where he got something, but he cut my hand. I don't know what he cut my hand with, but my hand was cut, but with something really sharp and I was like so scared because I think till that point of time, no one had physically attacked me. And I think that's when I actually ran outside. And he managed to lock the bedroom door [for a second time].

At around 9 a.m., Venu's friends arrived for help, and they started reasoning with the perpetrator and pleading with him to get out. After a lot of pleading and reasoning, at around 1 p.m. in the afternoon, the perpetrator left. Although that ordeal ended, Venu's landlord informed him that the perpetrator had apparently come back the next night, when Venu was not home, and had banged on doors and windows asking for some packet. Venu was scared and lived with friends for some time, before eventually leaving the house as he “did not feel safe or comfortable in [that] house” anymore.

Malik faced a similar situation when someone he met from Grindr refused to get out of his car. In both Malik's and Venu's narratives, the perpetrator refused to leave their personal/private space, making the participants vulnerable in their own home/car. Malik chatted to this person on Grindr and decided to meet him for a hookup. They decided that Malik will pick him up, go to an isolated location to hook up, and then Malik will drop him at another decided location. When they met, and

the person got into Malik's car, Malik realised that the person had catfished him, and Malik "did not like him" anymore. The perpetrator, however, tried to "verbally coerce" Malik to drive to an isolated place where they can hook up. As Malik "did not want it", he told the perpetrator that "there is no isolated place nearby [suitable] for hooking up". Upon hearing so, the perpetrator wanted to at least be dropped "some 20 km away to another location which [they] had agreed upon before". Malik refused because he "didn't want to tolerate him any longer, because he was not the person [he] wanted to meet". On Malik's refusal, he started verbally abusing Malik. Malik described the series of events as follows:

And so I told him that, you know, I can't drop you anywhere. And then he made the situation very uncomfortable by using abusive words and threatening me. It was like, 8 or 8:30 at night, and we were at the outskirts of Delhi, where there was not a lot of people, and it was quite dark on the streets. I stopped the car, but he was still, like you know, insisting me to drop him somewhere. I was scared that what if he has knife or something like that, because he was showing really aggressive behaviour. Because at that time, I was in a place where there were like, some people and some streetlights, but if I would have gone 20 kilometres outside Delhi, it would definitely have been more of an isolated and dark area, and I wasn't—definitely not comfortable about it. So, I forced him, literally, to get out of my car, while he was abusing and using all kinds of language, which definitely made me feel so uncomfortable.

To illustrate the uniqueness of this victimisation experience, I again turn to ANT. Conceptualising violation of private space as an ANT network, it is important to note queerphobia and sex negativity as key actants in this network. These actants

amplify the feelings of discomfort, helplessness, fear, and peril that happen as a result of the violation of private space. In the incidents involving violation of private space, users worry about hiding the victimisation in addition to getting the perpetrators out of their private spaces, for fear of queerphobic and/or sex-negative backlash. For example, Venu recounted hiding the incident from their landlord for fear of backlash: “my landlord...walked upstairs and tried to talk to me. And I fairly pretended that everything was normal and fine because of my previous [negative queerphobic] experience with my landlord”. As such, the victimisation gets compounded by societal queerphobia and sex-negativity.

In these two narratives of violation of private space, it is not clear if the perpetrators had planned on exploiting these actants. In Venu’s case, their perpetrator seemed to be angry at his bag being thrown, whereas in Malik’s case, his perpetrator seemed angry that Malik rejected him upon meeting. This is different to the extortion cases discussed earlier, where the perpetrators planned an extortion beforehand, and the crimes succeeded in part specifically due to the non-corporeal actants of queerphobia and sex negativity. Nevertheless, these actants clearly play a considerable role in exacerbating the impact and in creating a sense of helplessness among those facing them.

#### **5.4 FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS (FWB) FRAUD**

I propose FWB frauds as a separate class of frauds that lie somewhere in between romance frauds and being defrauded by an intimate partner. FWB fraud is very similar to romance frauds but differs in two important respects. As discussed earlier, romance frauds involve exploiting the relationship for financial gain (see Cross, 2020). Unlike romance frauds, where perpetrators develop a romantic relationship, FWB fraudsters mostly cultivate a more casual sexual relationship.

Secondly, unlike romance frauds, where a romantic relationship is developed exclusively online, in FWB frauds, the perpetrators develop a casual sexual relationship, which may or may not be exclusively online. As the FWB relationship progresses, and users start trusting their FWBs, they would typically start demanding money, citing crisis after crisis. Nicks and SW1 shared their experiences with FWB frauds. SW1 narrated her own experiences involving emotional fraud. She explained in broad strokes how emotional fraudsters operate:

what mostly has happened with me is that people tried to emotionally blackmail me. They make a very emotional bond with me, and then ask for money for [pre-paid phone] recharge or that they are in a crisis, and they are in very much need of money.

SW1 went on to explain how these monetary demands are trigger warnings or red flags, and that she morally does not feel that “it is right to ask for money from someone you only know for a few days”.

Nicks narrated in detail how he experienced FWB fraud by someone he met through Grindr, and with whom he used to hook up regularly. Nicks expressed how this person tried to con him “by pretending to have a sick father and by appealing to [his] compassion”. He explained that he had a mutually beneficial agreement with this person where Nicks used to treat him to beer, or sandwiches, or take him to McDonalds after sex as “he was good in bed” and “[such gestures] kept him happy”.

Nicks recounted getting a call from him one day saying that he is very stressed as his father got himself injured in an accident and has been admitted to a hospital. He wanted to come over and have sex with Nicks because he “wants some relief”. So, Nicks picked him up, they came back to Nick’s place, had sex, and he chatted with Nicks for a long time about his father’s medical problems.



After a few days, he called Nicks again, saying “you know, my father has to be operated upon immediately, and the hospital asking for 40,000 INR. And I don’t know what to do. And that’s why I’m asking you. Please help me”. Coincidentally, Nicks knew the director of that hospital. So, he called him and inquired as to why would a surgery in a government hospital would cost so much money. His friend informed Nicks that this cannot be true as the maximum amount that someone needs to pay is not more than 2,000 to 3,000 INR. Nicks got his FWB in a conference call with the director. When Nick’s friend (the director) asked his FWB where his father was admitted, he could not give any satisfactory answer, and disconnected the phone.

Both stories of FWB frauds involved the formation of an emotional bond and attempts to exploit that bond for financial gain. FWB frauds suggest that there is considerable trust and emotional bonds in non-traditional, queer intimacies (Hammack et al., 2019) that may be exploited for financial gain.

## **5.5 IMAGE-BASED SEXUAL ABUSE**

IBSA, as described previously, may consist of a range of interrelated behaviours, including non-consensual creation, sharing or threats of sharing nude or sexual photos or videos of a person (Powell & Henry, 2017). When meeting in the physical world, some participants experienced non-consensual creation of sexual videos, while others experienced an additional threat of distribution of the same. IBSA, with components of blackmail to extort money, sex, or to coercively create more private images or videos, has been termed as sexual extortion (or sextortion) (McGlynn et al., 2017). SW2 described typical cases of IBSA with sextortion that he had encountered:

In some cases [perpetrators create] a video [of a sex act and] ... they threaten that “we also have got your video, if you don’t respond to our call,

we will post this video on the social media or we will send these videos to your mother or father or to your colleague”.

Two participants in my study, Holly and Rajveer, experienced IBSA after meeting in-person with someone from Grindr. Rajveer’s perpetrator had asked for money/sex as payment for deleting the video clip, whereas Holly’s perpetrator made no such demand. Holly described hooking up with someone from Grindr, who he felt was “fine and reliable” after having chatted with them for about one and a half months. The day after hooking up with him, Holly recounted receiving a video clip of their “intimate moment” from him through WhatsApp. Holly felt shocked and violated:

I just lost it because I was like, “What the hell” because I just never thought that...he had hidden a phone somewhere [to record] us having that intimate moment. And I just freaked out because that was completely—forget about violation of privacy, but this was outright blackmailing. I told him like: “Look, this is not fair. This is completely [wrong]”—and he gave me very weird, perverted replies, I felt at that time. He said, “No, no, this is just for me and you, this is for the times when I long for you, this is going to be just between us”. But still, the fact that he was still a stranger, and I didn’t really know him that I just couldn’t believe, and the very fact that it was done without my knowledge at all, was a very big deal.

Holly met the perpetrator again and successfully persuaded him to delete the video from his phone but remained unconvinced that the perpetrator did not have copies of it on another device.

Rajveer spoke about experiencing sextortion while hooking up with someone through Grindr. At the behest of that person, Rajveer had gone to an “under-construction office-like structure” for the hookup:

We entered a small room [in the under-construction building] and he immediately said, “blow me”. I was like “why is he so rushed?” But I was like, okay, whatever. So I was blowing him. Almost after 2-3 minutes, I realised that he is holding a phone. I stood up like “Show me your phone. What do you have in here?” He said “no, no, there is nothing in the phone, you keep at it”, and he isn’t showing his phone to me. Then I understood, like “Shit, he was making my video”.

Rajveer confronted him and asked him to show his phone and delete the video:

I was like “you show me the video first”, then he says, “I have only made a little video, it’s nothing, I won’t show it to anyone, it’s just for me”. I was like “Why did you make it in the first place? Tell me that. When you want to have sex, call me. What is the sense of making this video? Watch porn instead! You are making a video against someone’s will, unknowingly, it’s neither legal nor ethical”.

After such altercation, the perpetrator started demanding money in exchange for deleting the video, and Rajveer started demanding for him to delete the video first. Their altercation went on for some time:

He was like “Don’t talk too much. Take out your money, come on, take out money”. I was like “what money?” I pleaded with him: “delete the video first, I will then give you money”. He was like “No, give me money first”. I understood that now he is going to blackmail me. Then he said, “buy me a

beer, and I will delete your video”. So, I said, “okay”. We went to a wine shop. The shop was out of beer. He said, “Give me money, I will drink on my own”. I was like delete the video first. He was like, “I won’t, do whatever you can”. I said, “go to hell” and left.

Rajveer kept receiving messages from the perpetrator demanding money and threatening to upload the video on the internet. Although Rajveer was annoyed, he felt somewhat reassured that the perpetrator did not have enough tech skill to upload the video on the internet. So, he chose to ignore the threats and blocked him:

I blocked him. I was like “Hell with it, I don’t care”. I know even if I pay him once, he will keep on demanding more and more money. I was like “okay, I have made a mistake, I will pay [suffer] for it, it’s okay”.

These narratives reveal two contexts in which people can experience IBAs while hooking up with someone through a gay dating platform. This adds to the limited literature (see Waldman, 2019) that explores how queer people experience IBSA in online dating environments. Undoubtedly, the IBSA incidents occurred in a hybrid (online/offline) environment. Holly’s and Rajveer’s IBSA experiences started in an offline environment, when their perpetrators made non-consensual intimate videos of them in the physical world. Whereas Holly became aware of the IBSA in a digital environment (through the perpetrator’s WhatsApp message), Rajveer became aware of the IBSA in an offline setting, when he caught the perpetrator in the act of filming. However, Rajveer continued receiving threats from the perpetrator of making the clip “go viral” in a digital environment (through the chat feature of the dating platform). These experiences illustrate that IBSA is a product of digital society, and is sustained by several technological affordances, although many of its elements also transpire in the physical world. As such, this harm erodes any clear

distinction of the online or offline world as has been posited in the literature (Powell & Henry, 2019, p. 3639).

Using Van der Wagen's (2019) "follow the tool" method, it can be stated that dating platforms continued to play a key role in sustaining the threats (Rajveer's case), even when the non-consensual sexual imagery creation happened in the physical environment.<sup>14</sup> The dating platforms' "block" feature, on the other hand, was emancipatory for Rajveer, as it allowed him to stop the threats from happening anymore. Hence, in this context, it is important to appreciate that while dating platforms are a key actant in the networks of victimisation (as discussed in Chapter 4), they can also be a key actant in destabilising the same networks in some contexts.

The IBSA experiences in the above narratives show that they may or may not involve an explicit demand for money and the threat of sharing private images. In the cases that SW2 mentioned, perpetrators had a clear motive of sextortion and executed their plan in pursuance of that. In Rajveer's narrative, Rajveer felt that the perpetrator might not have set out to commit sextortion, but Rajveer's anxiety with the video presented an opportunity for sextortion. In Holly's story, it is not clear as to what the perpetrator intended to do with the video beyond what the perpetrator told Holly. Even when there was no intention for sextortion, the perpetrator held the view that non-consensual filming of the sex act was acceptable. This is perhaps due to a permissive culture in societies where the role of consent is eroded (see McGlynn & Rackley, 2017, p. 549). In addition to fear of outing and humiliation, Holly and

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<sup>14</sup> The fact that a digital device was used in the creation of these images is also important in appreciating how embedded technology is in our lives in a 'digital society', and that IBSA has both physical and technological elements. A full ANT map of IBSA, focusing on technology can also help illustrate the roles played by different types of technology (not just 'dating platforms') in the network of IBSA.

Rajveer experienced shock and feelings of violation because of the lack of their consent in the creation of the video clips. They expressed this in the phrases “it is neither ethical” (Rajveer) and “that it was done without my knowledge was a big deal” (Holly). A blatant indifference for consent during the filming of sex acts points towards a larger issue of disregarding consent during sex, which I discuss below under the next form of victimisation.

## 5.6 UNWANTED SEX

Some participants in this study explained that their hookups arranged through gay dating platforms led to unwanted sexual roles, partners, and acts. I discuss these instances below.

Suman and Ravi reported being coerced or forced to *play a sexual role that they did not want*. Ravi met his perpetrator via Grindr. While chatting, the perpetrator said he was a bottom (the receptive partner during anal sex). During the hookup, after some foreplay, the person started coercing Ravi to play a receptive penetrative role, something that Ravi had neither considered, consented to, nor was comfortable with:

...then he said, “I’m top [the insertive partner in anal sex]”. That was unacceptable [to me]. Because he was telling me something that was completely different [to what he had told me on the app]. So, I was feeling really, you know...this is something which I cannot explain.

See, I’m top and I always look for vers[atiles] [those who play both insertive and receptive roles during anal sex] and bot[toms]. But he tried to, you know, force me...and I told him that, “No, I cannot. I cannot do what you’re trying to [make me] do” And he said, “this is your first time, let it

happen”. I said, “I cannot do this, this is something which I am not comfortable with, let me go!”... then I got dressed and [started to leave], he asked me to “come back inside” when I was at his door, [I didn’t listen and] left. But that was the worst moment because he forced me.

Suman reported meeting someone online and hooking up with them twice before they attempted to “sexually violate” him. On the previous two occasions, Suman had “played the role of a top”. However, on the third occasion, the person wanted to top Suman. Suman was able to flee, but felt scared, helpless and “violated”:

On the third [meet], the person was drunk, and he kind of tried to force himself on me, and he kind of tried to violate me, and it was, it was 2 a.m. in the night. And I was like, I was feeling hopeless. And the other person was quite strong and well-built. So, I thought that he can [overpower me] - it was an overwhelming situation. I [wanted] to shout or seek help from someone. And I didn’t know how to escape the situation, I thought I would get raped. I was in a very bad condition. [I thought] even if I get out of his room, how would I elope [from that place]? I was a newbie [in the city], [he lived in a crowded] dingy lane, I [didn’t know a clear path to] run away from that place quickly. I [also] didn’t have enough money... I felt violated to a great extent.

Paras and Malik reported that they were *forced or coerced to have sex with people that they did not consent to* having sex with. Paras, who hailed from Haryana and lived in Delhi for study, reported that after arriving at the house of someone met through Grindr, they were being forced into a threesome. Paras had been chatting with this person for 2-3 days on Grindr before deciding to meet him for sex. After reaching his place, they chatted, but after some time, Paras narrated:

he called a friend of his, without asking me, without my consent. And then he said that his friend will also take part [in sex] with us. So I denied, but he tried to force me a little. I was denying continuously, but he was going on forcing. He then suddenly held my hand. I instantly shook his hands off, pushed him, opened the door and left as quickly as I could.

Malik, who was from Delhi and lived in Delhi at that time met someone through Grindr for sex. The other person offered to pick Malik up in his car and go to another location for sex. When he arrived, Malik realised that there were two more people in the car with him. At that point, Malik felt like he “had no other option but to sit in the car”. He did not feel “very uncomfortable but wasn’t feeling very comfortable either”: “it was like a dilemma, [but then I thought] everything will be fine because I was in the middle of the city, so...I sat in the car”. The guy who he had been chatting to kept saying “just chill and don’t worry about anything, they [the two other guys] are okay”. Malik remembered thinking “Okay, but I don’t want to have orgy with you guys”. They drove to an isolated area in a semi-public park in a housing society for police officers. This made Malik think that one of these people must be working in the police. As Malik described the incident:

...so this guy, who I [had] like[d], asked me to come with him. I went with him. I had sex, I enjoyed it thoroughly. But ahh.... then he’s like, you know, you will have to have sex with the other two people as well, which made me you know, feel very uncomfortable. And I was scared because I didn’t want to have sex with these people, but there was no other choice, but to have sex with these people. Then I ended up you know, sucking this guy’s dick. And then there was like a third person whom I did not like at all. And then I ended up...giving a hand job to the third person... [After that] I was feeling



very uncomfortable, because I just didn't know, what is going to happen next, what will they ask me to do; fortunately, they dropped me back at our agreed location.

Malik reiterated his inability to refuse or say no very clearly:

Because I was in a situation where there was no escape and I was worried that if I raise my voice or like try to run...they might physically harm me, although [they did not show any] signs of that, but it was definitely an intimidating situation for me because they were three people, and I was alone.

As such, Malik reported that “those 25 minutes or 30 minutes [were] very traumatising, and something I would never want to feel again”.

Using Van der Wagen's (2019) “follow the tool” method, it can be illustrated that in the narratives of both unwanted sexual roles, and unwanted sexual partners, perpetrators used the gay dating platforms (the tool) to deceitfully obtain consent. For many users, gay dating platforms act as a space to negotiate consent. When meeting someone via a gay dating platform, expectations around sex acts and kinks start early. For example, it can start from the browsing stage of profiles, where users already know that they are looking for people who play a specific sexual role. For example, Ravi said “See, I'm top and I always look for vers[atiles] and bot[toms]”. Then, during the chatting phase of interactions, users talk about sexual preferences, expectations, or kinks. In fact, Wignall (2020, p. 70) reports that many users of gay dating platforms navigated consent by “discussing interests and things they will not do” before meeting people physically for sex (see also Marcantonio et al., 2021). So, interactions on dating platforms already set clear expectations around sexual role,

acts, or the number of partners, and provide a helpful avenue for users to negotiate consent beforehand. This technological affordance is particularly useful for queer individuals, as some studies report that consent conversations are more complex when it comes to sex among queer people (de Heer et al., 2021; McKie et al., 2020; Sternin et al., 2021).

This technological affordance, however, is also used deceitfully by perpetrators. In Malik's, Paras's and Ravi's narratives, what transpired during physical meets turned out to be very different from what was negotiated online, and hence, either deceitful or unexpected. In some cases, the intention to deceive was clearly apparent, like in Malik's or Paras' narratives, where perpetrators invited friends to have sex with them without seeking their consent. In Ravi's case too, there was a clear deviation from what was discussed during online interactions in terms of sexual roles. Clearly, perpetrators in all these narratives used the dating platform to set more agreeable terms, but during physical meets, changed their terms, knowing that it is more awkward for people to escape, leave or say no in physical settings (see Zytka et al., 2021). Moreover, in some cases, like in Malik's story, the perpetrators outnumbered him, making him give in to their demands, fearing his safety. Additionally, perpetrators also used force and coercion during in-person meets to pressure people into unwanted sex. For example, in Ravi's story, in addition to deviating from the sexual roles agreed upon, there was considerable coercion and force from the perpetrator to pressure him into bottoming. In Suman's story as well, his sexual partner used force to pressure him into sex. These incidents also illustrate the argument that in a digital society, offending and wrongdoing contains both online (deception) and offline (use of force) elements (Powell et al., 2018; Stratton et al., 2017).

I now move on to discuss the last narrative of *unwanted sex*, as experienced by Holly, that he described as “*sexual violation*”. Holly narrated his experience with sexual violation perpetrated by someone that he met through Grindr. Holly spoke about meeting his perpetrator a few times casually in public, and he “seemed fine”. However, upon meeting the person at his house, Holly did not like him anymore, as he presented himself “in a shabby way”. Holly also described not liking his room, which had no curtains, such that anyone walking by the room could see inside. However, despite Holly communicating that he was not comfortable, his perpetrator manipulated the situation to such an extent that Holly felt his only way out of that situation was by having sex with that person:

... I sat there [in his room], thinking of ways to get out of this place, because I really didn't want to be there...[.] He sat next to me in the bed, I said, “Listen, we probably should go out somewhere else”, but by the time I was trying to convince him, his hands were in my private parts, and yeah, at that point, he, you know, started kissing me and all that stuff. I felt very forced upon, like, forced into that act. Like, inside, I was like, “You know what, just get done with this and just go home” because he's not going to let it go until you know...now I completely realised like his intention of inviting me was to have sex and stuff so yeah, so I was like, “Okay, can you just do something about the window, it's going to really haunt me, you know, while passing by you can take picture or something, it's going to be horrible”. He put down a cardboard that kind of half-covered the window but didn't really help the purpose. But I was like, my concern was not at all [the window], it was being there doing this with him in the first place. So, I bit of felt like I was compelled into it. And my only way of getting out of it was to do it and just get out of

that place. So yeah, we ended up having sex, which was very just not like... enjoyable for him am sure, but very, very worrisome and kind of compelling sort of act for me.

Holly felt “compelled” into sex, as he felt his perpetrator would not let him leave the house without having sex. Holly felt his experience was “a bit more of a sexual violation, rather than being raped, because rape would have been outright protest, unwilling to do it”. Holly’s observation is in line with findings in the literature which report that people are less willing to acknowledge rape when “rape scripts” (consisting of physical violence and forceful resistance, for example) are not followed (see Ryan, 2011). In Holly’s narrative, in addition to coercion, manipulation was also apparent during the physical meet. Holly described communicating his lack of consent in the following words to the perpetrator: “I don’t feel right. I’m probably going to go”. Despite this, the perpetrator kept on convincing Holly to stay back. Holly’s story illustrates diminished respect for a sexual partner’s wishes in a hookup situation (with someone met via gay dating platforms). Alternatively, if one argues that the perpetrator’s action was not malicious, then his actions point towards the lack of understanding of the changeable nature of consent. In Holly’s narrative, for example, although coming to someone’s home can be perceived by some as sexual consent (Muehlenhard et al., 2016), Holly’s consent changed at a point of time in the perpetrator’s house. An inability (or unwillingness) to accept such change indicates the lack of appreciation of the changeable nature of consent (see Muehlenhard et al., 2016). Such an understanding of consent can help prevent unwanted sex situations.

## 5.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter, along with Chapter 4, answered the first research question (RQ1) posed in this thesis: What forms of victimisation are experienced by the users of gay dating platforms in India, in what contexts do they occur, and what factors play a role in such victimisation?; In this chapter, I continued the discussion around the various contexts in which gay dating platform-related victimisation takes place in India. In this chapter, I discussed six major types of victimisation that users of gay dating platforms experienced after meeting another user in-person. I showed that societal queerphobia, sex-negativity and family honour, as socio-political non-corporeal ANT actants, significantly shape, sustain, and exacerbate some of these forms of victimisation, such as extortion, abduction, and violation of private space. Additionally, I also showed that in some experiences of unwanted sex, although gay dating platforms provide a viable space for easy consent negotiation, perpetrators often use deception to acquire consent and then use force or manipulation to various degrees to victimise others. In the next chapter, I answer the next two research questions of the project, RQ2 and RQ3, where I discuss the consequences of the victimisation experiences, people's responses to victimisation, and the barriers that they face in seeking help or support.

# Chapter 6: Consequences of and responses to victimisation

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In this chapter, I answer the second and third research questions: (RQ2) What are the consequences and impacts of gay dating platform-related victimisation?; and (RQ3) How do the users of gay dating platforms respond to victimisation and what challenges do they face in doing so? I firstly answer the second research question by explaining the short and long-term consequences of gay dating platform-related victimisation, and how they produce unique affects of shame and guilt. In answering the third research question, I then discuss participants' responses to such victimisation by reporting on their actions after victimisation. I subsequently discuss people's help-seeking efforts, and how structural *disgust* for and *shaming* of queer sex act as barriers to such efforts. I explain how disgust acts covertly and structurally across the criminal justice system, workplaces, neighbourhoods, families, and social circles to uniquely shame queer people and influence their responses to victimisation. Finally, I outline the need for interventions at structural and technological levels to effectively support users of gay dating platforms who experience victimisation, which I build upon in the next chapter.

## 6.1 CONSEQUENCES OF VICTIMISATION

In this section, I discuss the immediate and long-term consequences of gay dating platform-related victimisation on the users. The first question that I asked the participants regarding impacts and consequences of victimisation was a direct one: "How would you say the incident had impacted you or your emotional health?". A broader question that I had asked my participants was, "Looking back, how do you make sense of what happened"? The dominant themes that emerged include feelings

of self-blame, shame, guilt, shock, trauma and distrust; and reducing or ceasing dating platform use altogether. Literature based in India has discussed mental health issues faced by queer people generally, because of societal stigma and queerphobia (Bhattacharya & Ghosh, 2020; Kealy-Bateman, 2018; Mimiaga et al., 2015; Wandrekar & Nigudkar, 2020). Limited studies have explored the specific mental health impacts of victimisation on queer individuals in India. The findings from my interviews add to these bodies of literature by highlighting the mental health consequences of gay dating platform-related victimisation.

### **6.1.1 Feelings of shock and trauma**

While most participants described the incidents themselves as “horrible”, “terrifying”, and “shocking”, some participants spoke of their effects on their mental/emotional health in greater depth. For example, Ravi, who experienced coercion to play an unwanted sexual role, recounted being “in shock for a couple of hours” before “[eventually] letting [the feeling] go”. Ravi remembered just “sitting there” after returning home and “everyone asking me what happened with me”. Tushar, who experienced extortion with attempted assault, felt “completely shaken” and “couldn’t believe that [the incident] happened [during] his second meet with the perpetrator”. Suman, who experienced an extortion attempt along with assault, felt “shattered” and “shaken” and did not seem to know if he would be able to hook up with new people after the incident. Anand, who experienced extortion, recounted remembering it “vividly [and] a few days—one or two days—I was a little affected by it, like ‘*kya ho gaya*’ [what happened to me]” in a tone of shock/disbelief.

Nicks spoke at length on the mental health impacts of the extortion. Nicks discussed that in addition to the financial loss, “it was a loss of many levels” and “the emotional and mental loss was horrific”. He narrated not being able to sleep properly

for many nights, “crying and all”, and feeling “mentally ...drained”. Nicks especially lamented the robbery of his father’s gifted watch, “which was very, very emotionally important to [him]”. He explained that his house stopped being his “safe space—that feeling [of safety] was robbed from me, which was the biggest loss for me...I felt so upset [and] so angry”. He felt more upset because he could not “ask for help or resist the robbery” because of being closeted and outnumbered at the time of the incident.

Several participants specifically discussed experiencing trauma from the incident. For instance, Tushar, who experienced extortion along with a threat of assault, explained that after the incident, he “had psychological trauma for ten days”: “it traumatised me [so much] that I did not even think about dating and all for some time”. Tushar further elaborated: “I am laughing now because I have moved on from this situation, but sometimes it really haunts me because the secondary effects [were] very bad”. Rajveer, who experienced an abduction attempt, also recounted being “literally traumatised... [and feeling] totally shattered” initially. Kartik too, who faced an extortion attempt along with assault, discussed feeling traumatised for a week: “it took me around one week to let that sink in my own body and mind that ‘okay, that has happened to me’”. Nevertheless, both Kartik and Rajveer felt thankful that they were safe and kept thinking about how lucky they were for being able to escape the perpetrators so narrowly.

Venu, who experienced an extortion attempt and subsequent humiliation by the police at their residence, spoke at length about trauma and receiving professional help for it. Notably, the trauma was as much from the victimisation itself as it was from the surrounding context. They explained that the “whole experience was very traumatising” for them and that it took them about five months to not feel scared of walking upstairs in their house, as every time they would step on the staircase, it would



remind them of “how [the police] dragged [them] downstairs, how the cops behaved and how the whole experience was”. Furthermore, they could not sleep in their bedroom because of “the whole images [vivid memories] I had in my mind”. Venu had also experienced a second incident involving assault and violation of physical space when their potential hookup had locked himself in Venu’s bedroom and had refused to leave. They explained that this incident affected them so much that they experienced “post-traumatic stress disorder...in a way that [they could not] even go to the office, there were days when [they] broke down in the workplace”. They elaborated further:

I think I kept breaking down a lot [during the days immediately following the incident]. I was like so scared that this person will come in [to my house again] and do whatever—and actually [it] did happen [once that] I heard someone banging [on] my windows...[.] It took me almost like one year to really establish that my house is a safe space...[.] I was so scared, I was like, so traumatised throughout...[.] I still have—when someone tries to hug me or get attached...the trauma kicks in [and] I just can’t go close to a person. I also sort of zone out...

There is ample evidence in the literature of secondary mental health impacts of crimes on victims/survivors (Brewin et al., 1999; Robinson & Keithley, 2000; Weaver & Clum, 1995). Some literature has also reported on the mental health impacts on queer victims/survivors of crimes, including queerphobic harassment and hate crimes (Feddes & Jonas, 2016, p. 62; Herek et al., 1999; Priebe & Svedin, 2012; Stotzer, 2014). Priebe and Stevin (2012) reported that “same-sex attracted” people who experienced sexual victimisation or harassment showed greater symptoms of anxiety and depression than non-victimised heterosexual people, although they also found similar higher rates among “same-sex attracted” people who did not experience such

victimisation. Similarly, other studies have reported an increase in depressive symptoms and a decrease in psychological well-being among gay men and lesbian women who experienced verbal harassment and bullying (Feddes & Jonas, 2016; Polders et al., 2008). Feddes and Jonas (2016) have also reported that gay men and lesbian women experienced anger, irritation and hostility towards their perpetrators. The findings from the present study extend this body of literature to the context of gay dating platform-related victimisation in India.

### **6.1.2 Distrust of other users**

In addition to the incident's direct impacts on mental/emotional health, many participants spoke of becoming more doubtful and distrusting of people because of the incident. Suman said that the incident has made him “doubtful, like [he] always doubt[s] people”. He said he would ask potential hookups, “Hey, are you one of those [extortionists]?” Holly also remembered being doubtful of people in the queer community, which “impacted [his] relationships [and] understanding of gay community” as he felt “there is no sense of trustworthiness in the community”. Tushar, who experienced extortion, also described developing “trust issues”. He explained that whenever someone would speak to him nicely, he would think about his motive behind being so: “I developed so much trust issues...even when a genuine person talks nicely to you, you keep thinking that no, you can't trust him, there must be some negative motive behind this, that's why he's talking good with me”. This finding is in line with those from a previous study with victims of “anti-gay hate crimes” which reported that after victimisation, people show an increased fear of harassment and mistrust of people (Herek et al., 1999). Some studies have also reported how others' stories of victimisation have led people to mistrust dating platforms altogether (see Chiu, 2020; Norcie et al., 2013). The opacity of the

technology, that makes catfishing and romance frauds feasible (as discussed in Chapter 4), and the lack of robust verification mechanisms on dating platforms are other likely reasons that increased this sense of mistrust among users.

Unsurprisingly, many participants in the present study also spoke about reducing their dating platform use considerably after experiencing victimisation, which I discuss next.

### **6.1.3 Reduction in or cessation of dating platform use**

Many participants felt that their use of dating platforms changed after the incident. Some participants, like Venu, moved to a different platform from the one through which they experienced victimisation: “I think after my whole sort of experiences, I just use Hinge and Tinder. I’ve stopped using Grindr to meet people. I talk to people on Grindr, but I haven’t met people through Grindr [after the incident].” Other participants expressed that they took time off from the platforms: “I did not use Grindr for a couple of months - maybe more than that” (Ravi); “it took me months, to be honest, it took me months to come back again, but the use of that app is less now” (Kartik). Aranyak said that he lost interest in the platform altogether: “I’m not using Grindr now...only once in two months or something. I just log in, then I log out. I’m not much interested in the app”. Suman also described that he stopped using Grindr altogether and only meets people through Instagram. He felt that “when I meet someone from Instagram, they’re kind of known to me...”.

Literature on crime victimisation has previously reported crime victims avoiding activities that they previously enjoyed because these activities initially made them vulnerable to victimisation (Quinn, 2005). Specifically, literature on LGBTQIA+ hate crime has reported that victims/survivors avoid walking in places where they

were victimised (Feddes and Jonas, 2016; McDevitt et al., 2001). A change in dating platform use reported in this study reiterates such findings in existing literature.

#### **6.1.4 Feelings of shame, guilt and self-blame**

Many participants reported feeling a sense of shame and guilt connected to their actions that led to the victimisation. This feeling of guilt was centred around a belief that their lack of taking the “right” preventative measures led to their victimisation. For example, Malik, speaking in the context of his experience with catfishing and the perpetrator refusing to get out of his car, felt “somewhere” that “[he] should [have been] more cautious about meeting people...because [he] did not have a video call before meeting [the perpetrator]”. Similarly, Paras, who was coerced for a threesome when he had only consented to having sex with one person, said: “When I think about the incident, I feel I must have been in the wrong somewhere, that I met him directly [instead of getting to know him properly beforehand]. So, somewhere I blame myself somewhat for this”. Venu remembered questioning and blaming themselves during the incident, as they felt they should not have called a stranger over for a hookup. They recounted: “I’ve read [about] so many [victimisation experiences related to gay dating platforms]—it was actually a very foolish decision on my part to actually call a stranger”. Malik, in the context of his victimisation with unwanted sexual partners, felt that “[he] was responsible ... because [he] did not really care about...the outcome, [and] just went with the flow [and sat in the perpetrator’s car, in spite of feeling uncomfortable], which was definitely not the right thing [to do]”. Here, Malik was lamenting his decision of getting into his potential hookup’s car, even when he saw two of his friends were also sitting inside the car.

Other participants narrated that they only temporarily experienced guilt and shame immediately after being victimised, which they overcame eventually. For example, Suman, who experienced an extortion attempt, had initially “started cursing [him]self that why did [he] even go for it - this adventure”. Similarly, Holly, who had experienced sexual violation and image-based sexual abuse in two separate instances, said that initially, in his early 20s, “...all I felt that time was a lot of shame, a lot of guilt, that ‘shouldn’t-have-done-it-[feeling]’ [and that] this is not the right thing to do”, which he overcame eventually.

Many stigmatised populations have reported feeling considerable guilt and shame after experiencing victimisation (Christie, 2016). This can be due to the stigma associated with online dating or with being a victim, or both (see Cross et al., 2016). The findings from this project confirm this is also the experience for users of gay dating platforms. Further, the notion of guilt is also created/amplified by popular discourse around safe dating. Safe dating advice often centres around the self-regulation of users. Phrases like “keep your eyes open and stay safe” (Romeo, n.d.) or “don’t rush into things” (Grindr, n.d.-b) signify that if users take the right preventative steps, they can avoid victimisation. Consequently, many users of gay dating platforms consider their actions or inactions to be the key actor that caused (and hence, could have prevented) the victimisation. This notion, while true in some cases, is not universal. It often exacerbates self-blame and feelings of guilt or shame and impedes help-seeking. SW 3, who is a professional counsellor, also explained how important it was for people who had faced the incidents to “stop punishing themselves...[.] A crime has been committed on them, and no matter how stupid they feel, they cannot make themselves responsible, and that itself is a very tragic part of this experience”.

It is possible to understand shame in this context through reference to current theorisations of shame and queer subjectivity. Many studies have discussed the importance of shame to the formation of queer subjectivities. This can take the form of either opposition to shame, expressed through pride in one's identity, or it can take the form of internalised shame (see Eribon, 2004; Munt, 2008). Eribon (2004) posited that living "subordinate lives" in a context of societal queerphobia (with the associated affects of shame and guilt) is one of the most "universal" features of queer subjectivity, experienced and recognisable by any queer person around the world. Johnson (2012), following Tomkins, opined that unique events trigger these shame affects for queer individuals, which then interferes with their pleasure and enjoyment. Johnson (2012) further posited that as queer sex has predominantly been a "forbidden pleasure" across cultures,<sup>15</sup> shame is especially associated with it, which might materialise in unique ways in response to "particular situations". In the narratives presented in this study, shame materialised (whether temporarily or long-term) when people experienced victimisation in a hookup context: a situation arising out of/because of their queer sexual desire. Hence, following Johnson (2002), shame can be thought of as a key mediating factor in how people feel after experiencing gay dating platform-related victimisation.

## 6.2 COPING AND PROCESSING

In addition to the impacts of victimisation, participants discussed how they made sense of the victimisation experiences and how they coped as a result. The themes that emerged include blocking out the incident, normalisation, and

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<sup>15</sup> In an Indian context, theorists have maintained that queerness or queer sexual expression was fairly tolerated in ancient and medieval India outside the purview of compulsory heterosexuality and marriage (see Vanita & Kidwai, 2000). Nevertheless, in contemporary times, queer sexual expression is stigmatised (Srivastava & Singh, 2015).

forgiveness. Malik discussed “blocking out the incident” as a coping mechanism. Malik, reflecting on coerced sex acts with his intended hookup’s friends, described not thinking about the incident much, and “not feeling it...once it had happened”. With regard to his experience with “violation of private space” as well, Malik described coping by not discussing it or thinking about it to prevent it from overwhelming him: “I just did not think about it too much - yeah, that’s how I cope”. Nicks, regarding his experience with an attempted FWB fraud, explained that it did not impact him much, and he was able to “shake it off”, because he understood the perpetrator’s point of view. Nicks felt that young people need money because of a “hyper lifestyle inflation in India”, where people want material objects to flaunt on social media. Nicks thought that “times have changed, and young people...comprehend these [as] a necessity because of peer pressure...[which leads] to crime”. This understanding helped Nicks forgive the perpetrator and move on. He said, “I talked to...that other guy who tried to rob [me]. He was like, ‘sorry, and all’. I said, ‘I am forgiving you. But you keep your distance from me from now on’”.

Anand, who experienced extortion, emphasised taking it in their stride and normalising it. Anand did not feel his experience was any different to getting cheated while “purchasing any service, because of [one’s] lack of knowledge or awareness”. He explained

I don’t like playing a victim card...oh! I am gay; I got cheated...straight people also get cheated... if you go to buy a saree from a saree shop, somebody can cheat you and sell you expensive stuff...then also you’re emotionally harmed, so this Grindr is also a saree shop...these things happen in life sometimes, so you should take it in your stride and move on in life.

Similar findings have also been reported in LGBTQIA+ hate crime studies where researchers found that people normalise, ignore or block out incidents of LGBT+ victimisation for self-preservation (Browne et al., 2011; Moran & Sharpe, 2004).

Some participants reflected that the incident was a life-lesson for them, while many simultaneously acknowledged that it was not their fault. In other words, unlike the previous discussion on “feelings of shame, guilt and self-blame”, some people did not move on from the feeling that their victimisation experiences were incidents that could have been avoided by some action of theirs. Rajveer, who experienced an abduction attempt, summed up the complex feelings in the following words: “I know it is not my fault, but somewhere it was my fault too, and also it was not”. Some participants spoke about the lesson that the incident has taught them in their lives. For example, Rajveer said “I learnt that I should not go for blind dates or hookups that easily, I should chat [with] them, should know them much more, then after only go for hookups or meeting. It’s a lesson”. Likewise, Kartik, who experienced an extortion attempt, said the incident “has actually made me learn...that I should be...more cautious of...meeting other persons”. Anand said that life is all about learning from mistakes: “that is how you live your life, you learn lessons, you know”. Venu, who faced two crime incidents, also lamented “not [being able to] learn from [their] mistakes”. There is evidence in the literature as well of victims/survivors making sense of traumatic incidents by taking responsibility and blaming themselves (Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983; Sullaway, 2004). This finding is important because it shows that participants not only felt guilt as an immediate impact of the victimisation (discussed above), but also processed the incident in the long run like that: a life-lesson, where they were somehow at fault.



### 6.3 RESPONSES TO VICTIMISATION

Responses or reactions to victimisation experiences may start from the moment that victimisation occurs. Some responses happen at the same time and space as the victimisation. I have described these responses as part of the victimisation narratives presented in the previous chapters. For example, Suman and Tushar fled from their perpetrators, Rajveer yelled for help, Venu argued with, and Kartik threatened their perpetrators. These are examples of non-forceful resistance. Similarly, Ravi and Malik employed forceful resistance in pushing their perpetrators away. In the criminological literature, these tactics of forceful and non-forceful resistance have been classified as “target resistance” (for a typology of “target resistance”, see Block & Skogan, 1986, p. 245). Other kinds of responses happen *after* the crime has been committed. They can include seeking a private solution (self-help), notifying the police, or doing nothing (see Greenberg & Ruback, 1992, p. 196). Post-victimisation responses also include disclosing the incident and receiving advice, support or empathy (Greenberg & Ruback, 1992, p. 211). In this section, I exclusively focus on the responses that happen *after* a crime.<sup>16</sup> The responses that emerged from the interviews included private solutions to remedy the harm, measures for reducing future vulnerability, measures for protecting others, and seeking help from friends and community-based support organisations.

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<sup>16</sup> It is important to acknowledge that sometimes it is not possible to clearly demarcate a point in time when victimisation ends, especially in the context of a ‘digital society’. For example, Rajveer experienced continued victimisation because his perpetrator filmed him during a sex act without his knowledge, and kept blackmailing him for money, while threatening to post the video clip online.

### 6.3.1 Redressal and prevention

#### *Remedying the harm*

The first response that emerged from the interviews were private solutions or forms of self-help aimed at reducing the feeling of being harmed. Holly described one such private solution. Holly experienced IBSA, and in response, he met up with the perpetrator at a later point and “persuaded and convinced” him to delete the video from his phone. It was a “kind of a trade-off”, because his perpetrator wanted to have sex with him again in exchange for deleting the video. Although Holly was not sure if he had any other copies of the video, and the thought left him “in a very, very panicky situation”, he hoped that “things were fine”, because he had not come across any intimate images of himself on the internet.

Karan also described finding a private solution to his victimisation. As discussed in the previous chapter, Karan had experienced extortion and had been confined in his bathroom. After the extortion, Karan explained reaching out to a friend for help, “who was an activist”. The friend happened to know Karan’s perpetrator, and where he lived. So, he took Karan along with him to the perpetrator’s house and retrieved the extorted property:

...as soon as my friend saw this guy [the perpetrator], he [friend] slapped him tightly across his face. And then he [the perpetrator] was like, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. You know, I will return your things. And don’t tell these things to my housemates. They are straight. They don’t know that I’m gay”...[.] So I got my things back.

In both the incidents presented above, participants described knowing where the perpetrator lived, and confronting or reasoning with them to redress the wrong done. In Holly’s case, the redressal meant deletion of the intimate video made without his

consent; in Karan's case, it was retrieval of the extorted property. Similarly, while Holly executed the private solution all by himself, Karan had assistance from his friend.

### *Protecting others*

In addition to relying on themselves to seek remedies for victimisation, three participants discussed their efforts aimed at making other users of gay dating platforms aware of the perpetrators and their modus operandi, to protect them from potential victimisation. Suman, who experienced an extortion attempt and physical assault, discussed posting about the incident online on an LGBTQ+ Facebook support group to make others aware of the perpetrators operating in the area. One of the administrators of the Facebook group reached out to him, and provided more information about the offenders, how they work, and how they have victimised others using gay dating platforms:

The admin texted me "Hey, are you alright? This is a syndicate sort of thing. There's a group of people who extort money from people [through gay dating platforms]. So are you alright? Did you have to pay?" I said "No, I somehow could escape the situation. And now I'm home. I'm hale and healthy". And then the admin told me "I can show you a few pictures and [you can] see if these are the same people that were involved". Then when he shared all the pictures, I think around seven or eight pictures, I could identify one person. One person was there. It's a gang [of perpetrators].

The disclosure also helped Suman get in touch with a few other people who were victimised by the same group of extortionists, which made Suman feel he was not alone.

Rajveer and Paras recounted doing digital vigilantism or digilantism in response to the incidents. Digilantism involves anything that can count as “DIY justice online” and can involve naming and shaming perpetrators online or contacting perpetrators’ family and letting them know of the perpetrators’ actions (Jane, 2016, p. 287). Through their digilantism, both Rajveer and Paras wanted to make others aware of the incidents so that the perpetrators were unable to victimise others. Rajveer, who experienced IBSA, tried to make people aware of the perpetrator by taking a screenshot of the perpetrator’s profile and uploading it on his own Blued profile with a description of their crime:

I tried to upload the screenshot on my [Blued] profile saying “don’t meet this guy, he blackmails people, makes videos of sex acts, etc.”, but Blued did not even approve my post, just because it had those words [blackmail/extortion]. I did not do anything after that, but I tried to make people aware by word of mouth to not meet him. I tried my best to defame him, as much as I could.

Similarly, Paras, who experienced coercion for sex acts with a friend of their intended hookup, “took a screenshot of [his perpetrator’s] profile and made a separate profile detailing what he does with people after calling them for hookups”. Paras felt that others “must have benefitted from that information”.

### ***Reducing chances of future victimisation***

The next response that emerged from the interviews revolves around measures that participants undertook to reduce their own vulnerability in the future and manage their risk during hookups arranged via a gay dating platform. Such measures have been broadly conceptualised in the literature as “private solutions for protecting oneself from future victimisation” (Greenberg & Ruback, 1992, p. 107). Participants reported

verifying identities using video calls and social media, meeting first in public, letting friends know of their location when meeting someone, taking their time to know someone before meeting them in-person, and other measures to increase their perception of safety. I discuss these in detail below.

*Thorough background-check and identity-verification*

Some participants described employing a thorough background check before meeting or hooking up with anyone from a gay dating platform. This is because some participants felt “it’s very essential...not to be so trusting, especially on a dating app, because people are very cunning, and they have their own set of agendas” (Venu) and that it is important to “learn something from [the incident and] be careful, and intelligent next time” (Anand). Karan spoke of being “more cautious while choosing the right person to meet”. Anand said that after experiencing extortion, he “only meets people when he knows their background [age, job status]”. Holly narrated “scrutinising very minutely” a potential hookup or date, and “backing out...if he gets even a hint of trouble in their conversation, or in where they stay, or whatever”. This directly follows from the loss of trust that many participants developed after facing victimisation, as discussed earlier.

Many participants reported using social media and instant messaging platforms, like WhatsApp, to gain a better understanding of their potential hookup or date. Venu and Karan said that they both use social media to do a “rough background check” before meeting any person. Venu additionally said that they do not meet “people who [they do not] have mutual friends [on social media] with”. Venu further said that they only meet someone “if they come across as a social person [evidenced through their social media]”. Venu, Paras and Suman also used social media or other messaging apps to chat with the person to get to know them better. Paras, for

instance, believed that “two-three days of chatting is not enough time to know someone”, and “chatted for 7-10 days now” before meeting someone. Similarly, Suman said that he does not “go for instant hookups” anymore and takes his time to know more about the person.

Suman, Anand and Nicks said that they have started asking for phone numbers of their potential dates or hookups. Nicks explained: “a mobile number can be traced, [and] anybody who’s planning to rob you will never provide their mobile number, because there is no way in hell you will not be caught”. Some participants spoke about using video calls to ensure that the person looks the same as the pictures they shared on the platform. Kartik, for example, said that after experiencing catfishing, he now “makes sure that [he has] had video calls first” before going to meet someone. Ravi said that he asks people to share two [or] three pictures and sometimes, he does video calls too, before going to meet someone.

#### *Physical location-based safety measures*

Several participants discussed how the nature of the physical location where they meet a date or hookup makes them feel safer. Some participants spoke about meeting their potential hookups or dates in a public place first to understand them more, and to enable a quick escape, if necessary. For instance, Paras assesses that his “thinking matches with his potential date”, by ensuring “that their first meeting is a casual meet”. Anand similarly mentioned that he “prefers to meet...in a public place...[.] [He stays] in a township [gated society], and he tells a potential hookup: “come to the township, let’s take a stroll in the [gated society] compound, let’s know each other”, which allows him to “gauge things”. Nicks spoke of a similar safety measure, involving “meet[ing] someone casually in a public place first before bringing [them] home [for hooking up]”. Holly said when he goes for a hookup at

someone's place, his "first basic instinct is to scan their room [for] a camera" because of his experience with IBSA. Venu said that after their negative experience with landowners, they now only rent houses where landowners do not stay on the property, so that there are less chances of interference and surveillance from them. Venu further elaborated that their present property "had a security guard downstairs with an elevator to come upstairs and a CCTV camera downstairs also", which allows for their "peace of mind" when meeting someone from a gay dating platform.

The above discussion illustrates that users prefer to meet outdoors first than at their home as they perceive it to be safer, more comfortable, or less invasive. Undeniably, meeting in a crowded outdoor location is safer than an isolated or indoor location because of the presence of people around, which can increase chances of bystander intervention, that can help prevent victimisation. However, some forms of victimisation can be carried out in crowded outdoor locations, perhaps because even if there is an altercation, two cisgender men having an argument in public is often overlooked. Participant narratives discussed in Chapter 5 clearly establish that users of gay dating platforms face victimisation regardless of where they meet the perpetrators – outdoor (Suman, Kartik), indoor (Venu, Karan), private (Ravi), semi-private (Holly, Malik, Rajveer), their own place (Venu, Karan, Nicks, Tushar), the perpetrator's place (Holly, Suman, Ravi, Paras), their own car (Malik), or the perpetrator's car (Rajveer). Hence, although physical location-based safety measures work sometimes, it is important to keep in mind that such measures do not necessarily prevent victimisation.

#### *Other safety measures*

Some participants spoke of a diverse range of other preventative measures they take to reduce their chances of future victimisation, which I discuss here. Anand

spoke of a few red flags that he is wary of: “if somebody is in a rush to come to your place [for] sex...anybody who is a student [or]...not financially independent, who is not working”. Similarly, Aranyak felt that “monetary demands are definitely fishy”. Malik reported becoming “more cautious” and “stepping out of [his] car and seeing his [potential date/hookup before making the] decision of letting them in [the car]”. Karan said that he does not hook up with anyone after 9 p.m. and does not allow his hookups/dates to stay over as he believes that by minimising the time they stay at his house, he would be able to minimise the probability of victimisation. Paras said that when he goes to meet someone casually, or for hooking up, he makes sure that he “shares [his] live location with a friend” and lets them know who they are meeting. Paras further said that has read books on self-defence, carries a pepper spray, a multi-purpose knife and presents a “tough front” to his dates/hookups.

The abovementioned private solutions for reducing vulnerability seem efficient practical strategies that people follow to protect themselves from victimisation. These measures also align with safe online dating advice prevalent on most dating websites which revolve around self-governing actions (Grindr, n.d.-b; Romeo, n.d.; Sinha-Roy & Ball, 2021). However, the notion that victimisation could have been avoided by actions/inactions of a victim/survivor is also not entirely true. In fact, no number of safety precautions can stop crimes or harms completely, as is clear from the narratives discussed throughout this thesis. For example, Venu’s and Tushar’s experiences show that verifying someone’s identity through social media does not preclude victimisation. Similarly, Holly’s experience illustrates that meeting someone in a public place first or multiple times is also not a perfect strategy to prevent victimisation. Likewise, Tushar’s and Nicks’ experiences demonstrate that victimisation need not happen at the first meet but can happen in the second or even



third meet. What follows is that no number of individual precautionary measures can remove the possibility of victimisation, although they might increase the perception of safety for many. Moreover, this notion feeds into victim-blaming in the event of victimisation, and causes indirect shaming for people who experienced victimisation, which could act as a barrier to help-seeking.

Moreover, focusing overly on victims/survivors' actions that can prevent victimisation comes very close to, though may not explicitly involve, victim-blaming (Christie, 1986).<sup>17</sup> This is because essentially victim blaming unfairly categorises crime victims into those who are worthy of empathy and those who are not based on what the victim/survivor did to facilitate or impede their victimisation. In other words, victim-blaming focus largely on the characteristics and actions of victims/survivors that made the victimisation possible (McGarry & Walklate, 2015, p. 9). Hence, when discourses focus heavily on victim/survivors needing to take preventative measures to reduce their chances of victimisation, they are partaking in indirect victim-blaming. This feeds into and exacerbates feelings of shame and guilt, and can discourage people from seeking help because of a fear of being blamed (see Cross, 2018).

Using ANT to reflect on the measures undertaken by participants discussed above allows us to conceptualise such measures as points at which the stable assemblages that sustain the network of victimisation can be disrupted. For example, by making other users aware of the perpetrators through social media, Suman and Rajveer were seeking to destabilise the technological affordances of anonymity and non-accountability that perpetrators depended upon. Other participants sought to

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<sup>17</sup> I discuss experiences that involved explicit victim-blaming later in this chapter.

destabilise the technological actant of unverified profiles by doing a background check of the perpetrators. While these can be effective, it is important to note, as illustrated in Chapters 4 and 5, that many forms of victimisation in this context occur due to the interactions between multiple actants: both human and non-human, including technological and socio-political NCAs. Consequently, individual human actions will only work to a limited extent in preventing victimisation in this context. Hence, there needs to be an acknowledgment of those factors in discussions around prevention, which I consider in the next chapter. In the following sections, I discuss participants' narratives around help-seeking from friends and acquaintances.

### **6.3.2 Help-seeking**

Help-seeking has been defined as efforts towards receiving “assistance for and reporting victimisation experiences...to the police, social service agencies, friends, and families” (Kaukinen, 2002, p. 433). Help-seeking has been shown to reduce or buffer the impacts of victimisation. In the present study, after experiencing victimisation, people sought assistance from friends, acquaintances and community-based civil society organisations. While some received positive responses, others did not. In this section, I report on both these types of experiences, and demonstrate that many stakeholders partake in direct or indirect *shaming* of queer bodies and queer sex upon being approached for help. I further argue that this is produced, in part, by interpersonal and structural *disgust* for queerness and queer sexual behaviour. As such, I conceptualise shame and disgust as non-corporeal actants that impede help-seeking. I show that in contemporary times, this disgust is present across neighbourhoods, families, healthcare, and the judiciary, illustrating the structural nature of the actant.

### *Help-seeking from friends and queer acquaintances*

Many participants discussed reaching out to friends for support, advice and empathy. Venu and Rajveer received helpful advice and information from their friends upon disclosure. Venu reached out to friends at their theatre group, after experiencing an incident where their Grindr date violated their private space by refusing to leave their house. One of them said to Venu that “I know the DGP [Director General of Police], they can help you out in case you need cops to support you”. Another friend gave them a therapist’s number. Yet another friend told them about getting a tetanus injection, because they were assaulted with a sharp object by the perpetrator. Rajveer too shared his experience of the abduction attempt with his friends. With the help of one of his friends, who happened to live in the same neighbourhood as the perpetrators, Rajveer came to know of the residence of his perpetrators. Rajveer also explained that one of his friends had warned him about a gang of offenders operating in the area that he had gone to. He lamented forgetting that piece of advice, which might have prevented his victimisation. Both these narratives highlight key roles that friends play in making people aware of the crimes/harms they may encounter with hookups arranged via gay dating platforms, and in offering help and support after the incidents.

Tushar, Venu and Kartik spoke about receiving support and empathy from friends more generally after their experiences. Tushar said that after the incident, his friends “were helpful in every sense...everyone was helping [with] everything” and he was able to “rebuild” himself “because [of] positive friends around [him]. Similarly, Paras narrated receiving empathy and advice from his friend when he shared his experience of “unwanted sexual partners” in a hookup situation: “my friend told like ‘see now we can’t do anything about what has happened but do take

some precautions when you meet people through the app”’. Venu also recounted reaching out to their friends after experiencing an extortion attempt and receiving empathy, advice, and support from them: “it took me a lot of time before I could assemble myself and go to a therapist. But my friend...she helped me out, she was a huge source of support”’. Similarly, Kartik also discussed their incident with a close friend and received support from her. These findings are in line with literature that has reported that friends and family can help soothe the intense distress of crime victims through words and deeds (Cullen, 1994; Greenberg & Ruback, 1992, p. 211; Kaukinen, 2002, p. 435). Research on specific types of victimisation has also shown that crime victims/survivors regularly reach out to friends and family for informal support and receive both positive and negative support from them (for sexual assault, see Ahrens & Campbell, 2000; for romance fraud, see Cross et al., 2016). Some literature also evidenced queer people seeking help from friends after facing crimes or abuse (Calton et al., 2016; Merrill & Wolfe, 2000; Scheer et al., 2020).

Suman and Nicks reported receiving an empathetic ear not only from their friends, but also their romantic partners and neighbours. Suman spoke of disclosing the incident to his partner to “soothe his pain” after experiencing an extortion attempt along with physical assault. Nicks also discussed sharing his experience of “extortion along with intimidation” with his neighbour, cousin, best friend and his boyfriend, all of whom “were supportive and all of them were just thankful that [he] was alive and safe [and] in perfect physical health”. Nicks recounted feeling “relieved that someone has [his] back [and that his friends] were supportive”. Nicks’ words perhaps sum up the importance of informal support for victims/survivors of gay dating platform-related crimes:

Basically, what we want in a situation like this is someone to be with us, and someone to just hug us and tell us it's okay...everybody gets smacked down by life, but those who get up are the ones who are extended a helping hand.

### ***Help-seeking from community-based support organisations***

Only one participant spoke about reaching out to LGBTQIA+ support organisations for help and support, while their first point of support were their queer friends:

I reached out to NGOs...I reached out to ... a queer support group in Bangalore. So, I think, someone from [that organisation], told me like, "it's your space, no one can violate it...this person must have done whatever, but it's still your space. If he does come back, you know, like you are fully at your legal rights to come to the cops".

Venu also described contacting another support organisation for advice. They advised Venu to not go home for a few days and change his daily routine, so that the perpetrator "cannot come back to harass [them]". Although this was a dysfunctional response to fear of crime (Jackson & Gray, 2010), in that it reduced Venu's quality of life, it did prevent them from encountering the perpetrator the next time he had come to their house. Karan also mentioned knowing about community-based support organisations and online groups, but not needing to approach them in his case. Both Venu and Karan seemed to be involved in community activism, or have queer friends, who were activists. For example, Venu mentioned attending pride, and working for a queer support organisation now, while Karan spoke about receiving assistance from a friend who was an activist, during his victimisation. Rajveer described not being aware of any support organisations in his city, and not being able to trust any organisation in any case: "There are so many NGOs...I honestly, did not

even know of them, let alone trust them with an information so confidential and personal. There's a lack in publicising these services as well". These comments suggest that queer people who are not involved in the community might not be aware of such services. They also suggest that many were more comfortable in approaching friends/acquaintances for help, as opposed to organisations.

All three support workers provided an overview of the services that their organisation provides. Support workers 1 and 2 were from the same organisation, and they spoke of providing counselling, legal help and medical aid to people who have faced crimes or any incidents. SW2 discussed that their organisation explains the legal system clearly to everyone, and in case they decide to file a police complaint, someone accompanies them to police stations and courts during legal proceedings. SW3 spoke of providing free phone-based counselling support to queer people in need, including those who have faced gay dating platform-related harms or crimes. Nevertheless, there needs to be more publicization of the role of such organisations in helping people who have been victimised on dating platforms. I return to this idea in Chapter 7, where I recommend dating platforms partnering with local organisations, and disseminating the contact information of such organisations on their platforms.

### ***Challenges with help-seeking***

Several participants who reached out to friends, neighbours, and community-based organisations reported receiving negative responses. Other participants did not reach out to other in anticipation of such negative responses. Conceptualised as secondary victimisation (Berrill & Herek, 1990), these negative experiences have been defined in the literature to include abuse, discrimination, blame or harassment that queer people go through while reporting crimes (Berrill & Herek, 1990; see also

Harry, 1982) or seeking informal help (Berrill & Herek, 1990; Herek et al., 2002, Ross, 2015; Wells & Polders, 2006; Wolff & Cokely, 2007). People face these negative experiences across interpersonal and structural levels (see also, Scheer et al., 2020).

I turn to ANT again here to locate the actants that lead to these challenges. By “following the network” (Van der Wagen, 2019), I conceptualise the secondary victimisation that participants faced or anticipated facing in the aftermath of gay dating platform-related victimisation as an ANT network. In this ANT network of secondary victimisation, I focus on two major mediating non-corporeal actants: *disgust* and *shame*. I argue that the secondary victimisation that queer people face after experiencing victimisation is deeply connected to societal disgust and shaming of queer people and queer sexual behaviour:

#### *Challenges in seeking informal help*

Disgust fuelling queerphobia among one’s immediate social circle was one of the main barriers for some participants when seeking help. Nicks explained feeling queerphobic sentiments within his friend circle: “they would use homophobic slurs, not knowing that I am gay. And I would be forced to laugh with them, even though I felt sick to the core...[as] no one wants to be an outcast”. Similarly, Kartik explained that he did not share gay dating issues with his straight friends, because he felt that “those who are not aware of these things [queer sexualities], they don’t consider us as a normal person...”. Tushar, who faced an attempted assault and extortion at his home, explained the difficulty in reaching out to any friends or neighbours who were not queer. He explained his anticipation of secondary victimisation, and alluded towards the society’s ignorance and judgement of queer culture in general, and its disgust towards non-conjugal queer sex, specifically:

I ran [from the perpetrator] towards the [security] guard's room... but the first thing is that I can't tell anyone, the problem is that I cannot [ask for help from] anyone. How would I explain? What will I do? No one will understand until the person is from the community.

These narratives suggest that a queerphobic social circle, wherein *disgust* towards queer people is expressed, can make people apprehensive about seeking help from that circle of friends or family after facing victimisation. The disgust that lies hidden in queerphobic humour or ignorance that participants mentioned above surfaces clearly in situations of gay dating platform-related victimisation. This is illustrated explicitly in Venu's narrative, who experienced an extortion attempt. They discussed facing direct harassment and shaming during the incident, and eviction from their house after it, which emanated from their landowners' disgust towards queer people. Venu vividly described their landlady's disgust at the presence of the perpetrator, who was wearing gender non-conforming clothing:

She [was] like recoiling in that person's presence. Like "Get this person out of my house. I don't know *what it is* and all". She was using, she was almost like dehumanising that person. I was...a little taken aback because with me, she was always fine. But the way she described that person and everything... [emphasis added].

The landlady's recoil and hostility towards both Venu and the perpetrator, due to the explicit queerness of the situation, illustrate her deep-rooted disgust towards (visibly) queer bodies. Later that evening, the landowners visited Venu and lectured them on how wrong they were to use a gay dating platform, advised them to get married to a cisgender woman, and additionally asked them to vacate the property in



a matter of days. This narrative provides an example of secondary victimisation that people face in the aftermath of victimisation from informal sources.

This narrative also overlaps with the notion of *victim-blaming*, which, as mentioned previously, says that society unfairly divides crime victims into those who are “deserving” of empathy and those who are not (see Christie, 1986). In addition to Venu, Suman, Rajveer and Boishakh also experienced secondary victimisation and victim-blaming during help-seeking. Suman said that after he shared his story on a secret Facebook group for LGBTQIA+ people, some group members questioned his choice of going for a hookup with a stranger when he had a partner and suggested that he remain monoamorous. Suman recounted receiving sex-negative comments which overlapped with victim-blaming: “Oh, since you were involved in [anonymous sex], so you were [being] immoral, so you don’t deserve the support”. Similarly, Venu disclosed that when they got physically assaulted by their “date” in a separate incident “[their] friends were so angry at [them] for having done this to themselves (sic.)”. Similarly, when Rajveer shared his IBSA experience with his friends, his friends chided him: “*tere to khub...tere ko chain nahi hai ghar me baithne ka...*[you keep getting yourself in trouble, why can’t you sit at home peacefully]?”. Boishakh spoke about facing secondary victimisation by a classmate, whom he had turned to for support. Instead of helping Boishakh, he lectured Boishakh on the unethical nature of queer sexualities, which Boishakh found uncomfortable:

...he started saying that I shouldn’t do these things [use gay dating platforms]—like these are not ethical things to do and I should get myself checked whether I’m really a gay person or not. So that’s a stupid thing.

The literature on victim-blaming corroborates the fact that stigmatised populations face victim-blaming in the event of crime victimisation. Society deems worthy or

“ideal” victims/survivors those who, among other things, were victimised by an unknown perpetrator, while carrying out a respectable project, in a respectable place and hour (see Christie, 1986). As sex, and especially queer sex, is not perceived as respectable by many in Indian society (see Chakravarti, 2011; Das, 2014; Majumdar, 2018; Shukla, 2007; Sinha-Roy & Ball, 2022; Subaiya, 2008), people victimised in the context of gay dating platform-related interactions (hookup or sexting) are deemed “unworthy” of support or empathy. I argue that the non-respectability of queer sex emanates from the non-corporeal actant of disgust towards queer sexual practices, especially towards those unmarked by love or conjugality. Additionally, chatting with the perpetrators for some time before the actual victimisation during a physical meet also gives rise to an impression that the perpetrators were not completely unknown to the victims before victimisation. This makes the victim/survivor appear to be a non-ideal victim in Christie’s (2016) schema. Hence, even when people experienced victimisation while seeking love online (not sex), they were not immune from victim-blaming.

Indeed, SW3 discussed that a Facebook post on romance fraud victimisation on a LGBTQIA+ page received several judgmental comments from other queer members of that group: “some of the first comments were ‘What an idiot’ [and] ‘Why did he give away so much money?’”. Romance fraud literature has also shown that romance fraud victims/survivors are attributed “non-ideal victim status” and find it difficult to access help and support (Cross, 2018). SW3 felt that “judgement is almost automatic for us, a lot of people come with it, even people within the [queer] community, who understand the vulnerability, and know what the situation is like for the people who are lonely”. In light of these instances, it is unsurprising that the

apprehension of victim-blaming prevents gay dating platform users from seeking help from friends, neighbours, or online queer groups.

*Interpersonal challenges in approaching the criminal justice system*

As is clear from the preceding sections, many of the victimisation experiences discussed fall into the category of crimes. I asked the participants who had experienced crimes if they thought about reporting the incident to the police. All participants replied in the negative and cited a range of reasons for that decision. In this section, I focus on the interpersonal barriers of harassment and victim-blaming, and use ANT to highlight how disgust for queer sex harboured by the criminal justice system acts as a barrier in reporting crimes.<sup>18</sup>

Participants' fear of harassment, shaming and victim-blaming at the hands of the police were major interpersonal challenges in reporting gay dating platform-related crimes. For example, Holly feared that he "might be shamed in front of other people [in the police station]" and victim-blamed for arranging a hookup with a stranger from a gay dating platform. Paras also felt similarly and said that "when someone goes to file a complaint [for crimes related to gay dating platforms], they are not seen as a victim, instead they are blamed for their actions". Malik felt that going to the police for help/redressal is another way of [inviting severe] "harassment" which would make the crime he faced seem "smaller in comparison". Malik also shared a story of his friends facing humiliation at the police station and being outed to their family, a story that had strengthened his belief in police harassment. Suman shared a similar sentiment, saying "I'm afraid of police because of how police treat queer people" and shared stories of trans people experiencing

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<sup>18</sup> Literature on hate crime reporting by queer individuals has reported similar barriers (Chakraborti & Hardy, 2015; Christmann & Wong, 2016; Comstock, 1989; Culotta, 2005).

police harassment. Malik, Suman and Ravi felt that the police “will not understand”, demonstrating a perception of insensitivity and ignorance among the police. Hence, most participants, despite wanting to report the crime, could not approach the police for help or redressal.

In addition to Christie’s victim-blaming model (2016) discussed above, the perception among queer people of a hostile police culture in India can partly be attributed to the history of direct interpersonal abuse and violence perpetrated by the police on the queer community (for some documented instances of police abuse, see Misra, 2009; PUCL-Karnataka, 2001; Rege, 1996). Unsurprisingly, participants who had experienced the victimisation before this date could not even imagine approaching the police as they felt that the law “didn’t give [them] enough authority or power to actually hold anyone accountable for [anything] done wrong to [them]” (Holly). Venu, Malik and Boishakh discussed their inability to go to the police because of “gay sex” being a crime. In fact, Venu reflected that “section 377 not being there at that point of time” would have really helped them deal with the victimisation. Venu also experienced secondary victimisation meted out by the police after facing an extortion attempt. I have summarised their experience below to offer a snapshot of police hostility towards gay dating platform-related victimisation.

Venu was shamed and lectured on moral propriety by the police after facing an extortion attempt by someone they met via Grindr. As discussed in the previous chapter, Venu’s extortionist started shouting at their doorstep to create a scene to intimidate Venu into paying them money. Venu’s landlady heard this commotion and called the police. The police took Venu down to the street for questioning, went through their phone’s photo gallery and made insulting remarks about them and their friends’ gender expressions and sexual orientations. They also opened Grindr on

Venu's phone, went through their photos and chat conversations, and lectured them to not use gay dating platforms. They also pointed at Venu's genitals, made insulting remarks about their body, and openly speculated on the sex roles they play. The police kept asking about their salary, and if they had money at home, supposedly to extort some money from them.

In addition to harassment, Venu's experience also demonstrates the direct shaming of queer bodies and queer sex by the police. Shaming has long been used in criminal justice as a technique to denounce offences and offenders, in naming and shaming punishments, and later in reintegrative reformation strategies, where offences (not offenders) are shamed so that offenders change their behaviour (see Braithwaite 1989). In Venu's case, however, the police engaged in shaming of the purported "victim", because they showed interest in queer sexual behaviour. This shaming of a queer victims/survivors of attempted extortion clearly reveals the disgust that the police harbour for queer people, queer sex and gay dating platform users. As explained earlier, queer subjectivities have a unique (and mostly negative) relation to shame. Hence, such shaming strategies are potentially doubly injurious to them (Probyn, 2005, p. 92), as was evident from Venu's long-term mental health impacts of the incident.

#### *Structural challenges in approaching the criminal justice system*

Many participants discussed their lack of trust in the police and legal system as a barrier in approaching the police. For example, Rajveer discussed having "no hope in the legal system" because of his experience with them. After facing IBSA, as discussed in the previous chapter, Rajveer thought that "making someone's video during a sex act without their consent is a cybercrime [and] there must be some [law or provision] about this in our India". So, he "googled [and] got an email ID of the

local [police] cyber cell”. He wrote a detailed email to them but did not receive any response: “honestly, you won’t believe, it’s been almost a year. I have not received any reply from the cyber cell”. Kartik too showed little trust in the law and felt that even if he had reported the incident, the case would have been dropped as he was sure that the police in his city would not know “under which sections of the IPC [*Indian Penal Code, 1860*] the perpetrators should be charged”. This lack of trust in the police is widely prevalent in India as has been reported in other studies on public perceptions of the police (see Chokkanathan et al., 2014; K. Nalla & Nam, 2021; Nalla & Madan, 2013; Tripathi et al., 2019, p. 440). Some studies on queerphobic hate crimes in other countries have also reported that “victims of [LGBT] hate crimes” showed low trust in the police and, consequently, reporting rates are lower for such crimes (Chakraborti & Garland, 2009; Feddes & Jonas, 2016).

These sentiments can be elucidated by the fact that queer people’s perception of the police is still marred by instances of harassment and violence. There is not much evidence to show that the queerphobic police culture has changed. Although SW2 felt that legalisation of gay sex has helped improve the police culture considerably, all three support workers I interviewed agreed that more sensitisation of the police is needed. Moreover, other than isolated instances of publicised police sensitisation workshops carried out by community-based organisations in big cities (see for example, Times News Network, 2020), there has been no indication of an improved police culture. Some literature has also argued that historical instances of police queerphobia taint collective memory of the community, unless active steps are taken towards positive change (Dwyer, 2014; Knight & Wilson, 2016; see also Johnson, 2010; Wolff & Cokely, 2007). Both SW2 and SW3 felt that the police culture is very diverse, with some police officers and stations being “quite okay and

supportive” (SW2) while others not as supportive. SW3 advised, “as there is a variety of experiences to be expected...if you are alone, by yourself, and you’re trying to file a complaint...go with a lawyer, or send a lawyer privately, you don’t go to the police station at all”, because of this potential lack of support.

Additionally, as illustrated in the narratives presented in the previous chapters, gay dating platform-related sexual encounters may not be geared towards conjugality. The judgment (*Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India*, 2018) that decriminalised gay sex in India depended heavily on the “right to love” discourse. As such, the law explicitly empathised with “loving” queer couples. As such, an explicit lack of legal recognition for those forms of queer intimacy that might be unmarked by love/conjugality also acts as a structural barrier against help-seeking for gay dating platform users. Moreover, *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* (2018) decriminalised gay sex in so far as it is conducted “in private”. This explicit mention of “private” is a testament to the law’s *disgust* with queer sexual expression, and its effort to “contain” it (see Raj, 2020, pp. 27–28). Public heteronormative sex, which can be policed using various obscenity laws, does not attract an imprisonment term of ten years, which is the maximum jail term that queer sex not conducted in private would attract. Hence, I argue that “othering” and disgust for queer sex lays embedded in the law. Furthermore, containment of queer sex to the private domain seeks to sanitise queer desire through invocation of the “right to love” discourse (see Raj, 2020). While such containment provides some validation to homonormative sexual expression, particularly to those marked by conjugality and class privilege, it continues to alienate (ignore) non-conjugal sexual expression and people who might not have access to private space. Hence, much of the contexts in which gay dating

platform-related victimisation happens, remains beyond the purview of even symbolic legal protection/empathy.

Furthermore, Kartik discussed the cumbersome nature of the criminal justice system as being a barrier to seeking help from the police. Kartik faced catfishing and an extortion attempt, and hence, did not have real photos of the perpetrator, nor did he have any “recorded phone conversations”. Hence, Kartik felt he did not have enough evidence of wrongdoing to approach the police. SW 2 also shared this frustration with the CJS. He explained that some police stations would be reluctant or refuse to take complaints of gay dating platform-related crimes, saying that they should instead file the complaint via a web-based cyber-crime portal. This insight also illustrates the practical problems that emanate from conceptualising crimes within a binary of “cyber” versus “real world” distinctions. Hence, as stated before, it is important that gay dating platform-related crimes are conceptualised as a hybrid network event having both cyber and digital elements, and as such needing the assistance of both cyber and physical law enforcement authorities. SW2 further explained that the web-based portal “takes lots of time to even register a single complaint and their response rate is quite slow: from 72 hours to five days”, which adds to the delay in getting any justice. Hence, the narratives illustrate that increasing trust in the criminal justice system is imperative to better support people who have faced victimisation related to a gay dating platform.

*“Outing” as a structural challenge with help-seeking*

Many participants discussed their inability to “come out” or disclose their sexuality as a major obstacle in seeking informal help or reporting their crime experiences formally to the police. This is because a discussion of the context of the victimisation, including arranging to meet a stranger through a gay dating platform



would create assumptions about one's sexuality or at least of their interest in queer sexual behaviour, essentially outing them. The outing could be of their queer sexual identity or their queer sexual behaviour. In any case, such disclosure can have repercussions within their families, workplaces, social circles, and society at large. These have been conceptualised as structural level minority stressors, which have been defined as “societal conditions [and] cultural norms...that constrain the opportunities, resources, and wellbeing of SGM [sexual and gender minority] people...[,] and also uniquely hinders SGM individuals from accessing trauma-informed, effective, and culturally sensitive formal services” (Scheer et al., 2020, pp. 148–149). In the current study, many participants articulated their specific anxieties if they were to be outed while seeking help or reporting crimes. These anxieties illustrate the structural queerphobia and sex-negativity in India that prevent queer people from seeking help.

Tushar said that “the [reason behind] not going to [the police was] to maintain the privacy - to maintain the discreteness - to maintain the familial [and] social profile”. He felt that if he was out, he would have “not cared and definitely raised [his] voice [against the extortion he faced]”. Nicks similarly spoke about his inability to approach the police, as he is not out, and felt that “extortionists rely on [closeted people's] inability to” approach the police. He also said, “had I been out of [the] closet, I would have walked into the police station and I'm damn sure they would have caught those guys before they could leave the city”. Aranyak said that he did not think of reporting the attempted romance fraud because he felt “[queer sexuality] is still a taboo, [even] though it is legal; [and he] wasn't comfortable reporting the incident to the cops”. Even when Rajveer filed an online complaint after experiencing IBSA, he did so after assuring himself that it will not lead to

outing: “I thought there must be some confidentiality about these emails, there is law in this country, it’s not like they will publish my [complaint] on prime-time television. So, I sent it.”

Anxieties about outing have been reported as a prominent barrier in reporting crimes against queer people in the literature (Berman & Robinson, 2010; Chakraborti & Hardy, 2015; Comstock, 1989; Culotta, 2005, p. 24; Leonard et al., 2008; Wells & Polders, 2006). Moreover, even though some users of gay dating platforms, like Venu, were out about their sexuality, they did not want to disclose being on a gay dating platform to their family. As discussed previously, it is important to reiterate here that not all users of gay dating platforms are queer, and many are on the platform purely for their interest in queer sex. As there is stigma attached to both queer sexual identity as well as queer sexual behaviour (see Mimiaga et al., 2015; Srivastava & Singh, 2015), the anxiety with coming out can be about (queer) sexual orientation, as well as (queer) sexual behaviour.

All three support workers opined that being closeted was a barrier to reporting crimes. SW2 also discussed that “when [someone is] not out about [their] sexuality, [it is a] major reason why these cases go unreported, which is a sad thing for all community members or as an organisation for us as well, because it’s a huge barrier”. Similarly, SW 3 said that “it is also almost impossible to get people to file [police complaints] against these types of crimes, because no one wants their identity to be outed or get the family involved and so on”. SW2 also said that people are not willing to come out and file a complaint “specifically because they know that there is social taboo attached to [queer sexualities]”.

The anxiety around outing is closely related to family reputation and societal queerphobia. Indian families are known for strong kinship ties and familial

obligations, which often translate into control, and hence, families have been sites of violence for many queer individuals (Ranade et al., 2020). Unsurprisingly, queer people are anxious about the repercussions of outing within the family (Mullatti, 1995). Help-seeking with regard to gay dating platform related victimisation has the possibility of outing the help-seeker and affecting their family reputation. Consequently, many participants decided to not seek help, formally or informally.

Some participants clearly stated their apprehensions about repercussions within the family, in case they were outed when reporting a crime. Rajveer, Malik, Ravi, Holly and Paras discussed fear of maligning family reputation as a major barrier to seeking help or redressal. Paras felt that “in India, people are more concerned about what will people think or say...society matters to them, not their own children’s [happiness]”. Rajveer spoke about the important role that his family’s reputation played in his inability to seek justice. Malik felt that he “had to shut [his] mouth” because a report to the police would have eventually reached his family, and his family would not only “not understand” but also “be ashamed” of his queerness, and not support him. Ravi also shared a similar sentiment and observed that it was impossible to tell anything to his family because “in Indian culture, it is really difficult for [the family] to understand [gay dating] and queer sexual behaviour”. Likewise, Holly also felt sure that his family would have judged him if he had spoken about his experience with IBSA.

The abovementioned quotes from participants illustrate the extent and nature of anxieties around outing and family honour in Indian societies. Indian families are structured along honour and shame, and exercise strict policing of social and sexual morality (Mullatti, 1995; Ranade et al., 2020; Sinha-Roy & Ball, 2022). This is because public honour of the family is considered more important than individual

interests or desires (Khan, 1994). Hence, collective family honour relies on every member of the family unit observing and following strict traditional codes and values, and hence, “shameful” private conduct, when committed, is concealed to maintain the public honour and reputation of the family (Weston, 2003). As indicated previously, queer sexual behaviour or identities are considered shameful, and hence, harmful to family honour in society. As such, family honour is another actant that impedes help seeking for many people who experience gay dating platform-related victimisation.

Outing is invariably also related to anxieties with repercussions at one’s workplace. I discussed Anand’s anxiety with their workplace finding out about their victimisation in the previous chapter (Chapter 5). Anand and Nicks also felt that reporting the incidents to the police would entail outing, and it would have repercussions at their workplaces, and hence, they both felt that not reporting the crime was comparatively better than losing a job. Nicks summarised the anxiety about repercussions at work succinctly:

I need to be able to walk into my office without fear that if I’m out, I will lose my job. They will not fire me for being gay, but they will find an excuse. It might take a month, it might take two months, it might take three months, but they will find some excuse to throw me out. I know a gay person who lost his job because only because he was gay, and his employer found out...even if the employer is compassionate, [or] sympathetic, if because of you, he loses clients, money, or any contract, he would rather employ a straight person or a straight acting person to keep that money or contract.

These instances of direct negative experiences including victim-blaming and specific anxieties related to outing demonstrate the structural nature of disgust for queer people and/or queer sex and how they act to not only shame people, but also render people helpless after victimisation. Disgust lies hidden in multiple social structures in India, which play a pivotal role in the experiences of queer people in India. The dangerous effects of structural disgust come to the fore in instances like gay dating platform related crimes, and when queer people need the help and support of formal and informal structures to cope. Multiple structures work together to effectively translate their disgust into implicitly shaming and explicitly blaming individuals for following their desire and participating in queer sex. Hence, to better support people who have faced victimisation related to a gay dating platform, it is imperative that this structural disgust for queerness is reduced.

#### **6.4 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I answered the second research question (RQ2) and showed that gay dating platform-related victimisation leads to several short- and long-term consequences. I then answered the third research question (RQ3) by reporting on the range of ways in which people responded after experiencing victimisation, and the challenges that they faced in doing so. I argued that the challenges can be pinpointed to structural disgust for queerness that exists within friend circles, neighbourhoods, criminal justice system, families, and workplaces. Considering the challenges mentioned in this chapter, I also showed that in order to avoid shaming and blame, people are left with no avenue, but to rely upon themselves to redress, prevent and help others from being victimised. However, such individual-level measures need to be bolstered through technological and structural level interventions to effectively prevent gay dating platform-related victimisation. In the next chapter, I build upon

this argument and outline measures, services and strategies that can meet the support needs of the users of gay dating platforms and reduce chances of victimisation.

## Chapter 7: Recommendations

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In this chapter, I answer the final research question (RQ4) How can gay dating platform-related victimisation be prevented or addressed? I present recommendations as to the measures and interventions that can be implemented to prevent gay dating platform-related victimisation and better support people when they face victimisation. As mentioned in the methodology chapter (Chapter 3), I have built upon the suggestions and insights offered by the participants in this study to offer these recommendations. Additionally, in line with their hopes and aspirations, I build upon the ANT analysis presented in the previous chapters to suggest steps that can be taken to target actants across technological, structural and institutional levels. Firstly, I explain measures that can be taken by dating platforms themselves to make the platforms safer. I then discuss the need for comprehensive sexuality education that can help create a more sex-positive and queer-inclusive society. Then, call for a more sensitive, empathetic and queer-affirmative healthcare system and criminal justice system, which will potentially make help-seeking easier for many. Finally, I bring together these suggestions in recommending a community policing strategy to deal with crimes related to gay dating platforms.

As mentioned before, Sex-Positive Criminology urges researchers to focus on social systems, and not individual human actions to uncover the role of institutions in oppressing sexualities and particular sexual practices (see Wodda & Panfil, 2020, p. 11). Gay dating platform-related interactions can be conceptualised as a specific form of (techno-) sexual practice (consisting of sexting or anonymous hookups, for example). The discussions in the previous chapters illustrate how victimisation experienced in such contexts secondary victimisation after it are caused by structural

and institutional disgust and apathy towards queer sexual practices. As such, following Sex-Positive Criminology (Wodda & Panfil, 2018; Wodda & Panfil, 2020), I acknowledge the right of people to engage in pursuits of pleasure through gay dating platforms and emphasise institutional and structural obligations in making such pursuits safer. Hence, in this chapter, I call for specific structural and institutional changes that can help prevent gay dating platform-related victimisation and offer better support to people who experience them.

To bring out the roles of structures and institutions in these forms of victimisation, I employed ANT analysis in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. This allowed me to explicitly illustrate the role that technology (gay dating platforms) and non-corporeal actants (structural queerphobia, sex-negativity, shame, and disgust) play in making the gay dating platform-related victimisation possible and in impeding help-seeking. I conceptualised both the victimisation and secondary victimisation during help-seeking as ANT networks, sustainable through the assemblage of various actants: human, technological and non-corporeal. In this chapter, I discuss measures that can target some of the key actants, in order to make it possible to disrupt or *destabilise* these ANT networks. Destabilising these networks will improve the support measures available for people after victimisation and also help prevent some forms of victimisation to a considerable extent. In recommending such measures, I draw from the insights and contributions offered by the participants in this study.

## **7.1 INTERVENTIONS AT THE TECHNOLOGY LEVEL**

In Chapter 4, I highlighted that one actant in many of the victimisation networks is the gay dating platform itself. Being cognisant of the key role that platforms play in victimisation, many participants wanted the platforms themselves to play a more active role in providing safer spaces and assisting people with



redressal and/or reporting harms and crimes. I discuss these recommendations first, to illustrate how technology-based interventions can change the nature of this actant, so that it ceases to be an actant in a network of victimisation, and the network breaks down.

### 7.1.1 Verifying and screening profiles

One of the first recommendations that emerged under this theme was active verification of user-profiles joining a dating platform. Some participants wanted a clear “no anonymity” approach: “if a person is interested in hooking up, it should not be anonymous at all. There should be *something* that validates his identity” (Karan).

Support Worker 1 also said that

on dating apps, you don't have any legal verification process, and anyone can just come up and have that profile on these dating apps... having some basic verification, which should be required because anyone and everyone can be on that app having multiple accounts without putting their genuineness. This is something that I feel is important.

There is indeed a valid call for the requirement of verification of users registering on the platforms. In addition to the stories shared by the participants, there have been instances both in India (Singh, 2018) and outside India (see Steinfeld, 2020) where undercover journalists have made profiles on gay dating platforms and outed unsuspecting queer people in sensational news pieces. A robust verification mechanism might indeed deter people or groups of people from registering on the platforms with the sole intention of wrongdoing. Multiple mechanisms have been implemented by various dating platforms: photo verification to stop catfishing (see for example, Bumble, n.d.; Tinder, n.d.); uploading of

government identity documents (see Tinder, 2021); and linking of social media profiles (Duguay, 2017). However, such verification through government-issued identity documents is contentious in terms of data leaks and privacy policies. Hence, the privacy policy of the dating platforms should mention who within the company has access to official identity documents of users and if those documents are appropriately encrypted. Additionally, as gay dating platforms have a history of data leaks and safety breaches (see D’Orazio & Choo, 2017; Shetty et al., 2017; for Grindr’s history, see Sriram, 2020), it is even more important to have a robust security mechanism in place to protect such data from outside attacks. Verification through social media or identity documents also impedes authentic gender expression or identity for non-conforming users, as they would involve matching and conforming across social media and government-issued identity documents, which might not be feasible for everyone (for a more detailed discussion, see Duguay 2017). Verification measures can also make users anxious about outing, as their identity documents and social media can be traced back to their gay dating platform profiles. Hence, introduction of any verification measure by dating platforms need to address the concerns for effective uptake.

In addition to verifying users joining a dating platform, it is also important to continually screen users who use discriminatory and exclusionary language in chats or on their profiles, without them needing to be reported. This can be done by investing more on human resources or Artificial Intelligence (AI) that can screen and moderate profiles effectively, as well as respond swiftly to the reports by other users. The rules of profile moderation and responding to reports need to be transparent, inclusive, trackable, and appealable in tangible ways as has been argued in the literature on general platform governance (see Gillespie, 2018; Suzor, 2019).

Furthermore, relying on a reporting function put in place by big dating platforms also demands considerable emotional labour from marginalised people at the receiving end of such discrimination, as they are most often the users who report problematic profiles (Mowlabocus, 2021). Hence, more investment needs to be made by dating platforms in a larger and more resourceful task force (human/AI) working towards screening exclusionary profiles from their platforms.

### **7.1.2 Assistance with locating perpetrators**

The second recommendation for dating platforms that arose from the interviews related to assistance with locating offenders. Suman and Rajveer felt unable to seek redressal because the perpetrators blocked them or deleted their profiles, and the digital disappearance resulted in the participants having no avenue of tracing the perpetrators. Hence, Suman suggested that dating platforms should be willing to help find those perpetrators who are able to escape due to the block affordance of technology. Suman said:

when I want to file a case or something like that, or probably I want to trace a person, there has to be some kind of mechanism so that they can be traced...they should definitely have something like that even if somebody deletes their profile, they are—and if they are caught in some kind of mischievous act, we can trace them.

Similarly, Rajveer said,

I met him, then he blocked me. [So] now I do not have any record of him and his ID—he has vanished—completely gone. Grindr needs to think that when [victimisation] incidents occur, we should have something at least. Because as soon as you're blocked, everything ends there, right?

Both participants described a sense of helplessness in their inability to locate a perpetrator after being blocked or after the perpetrator deleted their profile. They hoped for gay dating platforms to have mechanisms that could help them locate the perpetrators and potentially help report the incidents to the police. Similar concerns have been raised by survivors using other heterosexual dating platforms, like Tinder (see Dias, 2020). In the context of Tinder, it has been reported that the platform can track perpetrators, even after they have “unmatched” with a victim/survivor, at the behest of law enforcement authorities (Dias et al., 2020). Such functions need to be more transparent and easily accessible to victims/survivors, and need to be regardless of victims/survivors’ intentions to formally report the perpetrators to law enforcement authorities, as expressed by Suman. However, it is important to also consider the abuse of this potential by perpetrators. For example, harassers who might have been blocked by victims/survivors may use this functionality to find details of victims/survivors to harass them further. Hence, due diligence and an awareness of such potential is crucial on the part of the platforms before implementing any such policy and responding to any request for locating users.

### **7.1.3 Assistance with disseminating safety information**

Most participants in the present study said that they did not know about crimes or harms relating to gay dating platforms. Holly said that “in hindsight now, I think had I actually met someone who had experienced this, I would have been more cautious while going for dating or hookups over Grindr, but I never heard those stories before [personally experiencing] those two incidents”. Boishakh also said that he had not come across such incidents before facing such incidents himself but has since come across many such stories in newspapers, social media and from friends. Similarly, Aranyak and Tushar also said that they were not aware of victimisation

stories before facing such victimisation themselves. In fact, Tushar said “I have been dating for such a long time, I never faced something like this...I don’t know...so I had never ever given this a thought...Now I know many people face such incidents...I read a lot about this on the internet”. Support workers 2 and 3 also spoke about the need to make more people aware of the risks that meeting someone through a gay dating platform can pose. Upon being asked if they think there is enough awareness of these risks, SW2 said “No, absolutely it’s a big no in capital and bold...within the community, there is not much awareness, [and] I think we really need to do something about it”. SW3 said similarly: “Definitely no. Because the articles [we write]...nobody in rural [regions] has access to that information, unless they are actually going out and searching for it”.

Hence, raising awareness on gay dating platform-related victimisation can help disseminate knowledge around the issue. Gay dating platforms already have safe dating advice on their websites (see Grindr, n.d.-b; Grindr, n.d.-c; Romeo, n.d.-c). However, as discussed in Chapter 6, such discourses often individualise the issue, and affirm the notion that victimisation happens because users of gay dating platforms were too naïve or too careless. As shown in Chapter 6, taking preventative measures at an individual level do not necessarily prevent victimisation. SW2 said, “even when there is awareness, people repeatedly take that risk”. Across Chapters 4, 5 and 6, I created an alternative discourse, highlighting the role of technology and queerphobic and sex-negative structural factors in making the victimisation possible and the role of structural disgust in making help-seeking difficult. Hence, safe-dating advice must not unnecessarily put the responsibility of safety (and consequently, blame) on the users of gay dating platforms. Instead, these structural factors need to

be targeted at institutional levels, which will more effectively prevent gay dating platform-related victimisation.

With regard to safe-dating advice, concrete support services need to be foregrounded on the dating platforms. For example, instead of existing messaging such as “If you’re in an area that might be unsafe, use the highest level of caution and reference local human rights organizations for further assistance” (Grindr, n.d.-c), dating platforms can provide the actual contact details of the nearest LGBTQIA+ organisation in a region that someone can phone for help. Moreover, instead of one size-fits-all messaging like “You can also go to Human Rights or LGBTQ+ organizations for help, and if you feel comfortable, report to law enforcement” (Grindr, n.d.-c), platforms need to go one step further and partner with the law enforcement agencies of the countries (and states) they are operating in, to provide people with accurate information on the nearest service providers. In India, this can be most easily done by partnering with civil bodies or NGOs having existing relationships with law enforcement. Such partnerships can follow the model of Blued-India, which recently partnered with local NGOs across India to disseminate information about local HIV testing, counselling, and treatment (Blued India, 2021). Further, safety information needs to be linked to the user-interface of the platform directly, instead of on separate webpages, which users do not necessarily see. For example, when users are prompted to “upload a profile pic”, a message about the ways that perpetrators may use profile pictures for blackmailing or identity theft might be useful.

Both SW2 and SW3 spoke about efforts undertaken by them to create more awareness of the issue and how more work needs to be done in partnership with governmental and non-governmental bodies. SW2 said: “I think we really need to do

something about it...we also do lots of training with our partners [where] we highlight the concerns that we have on the dating apps...how safe they are for the community members”. Similarly, SW3 said that they are trying to partner with dating platforms to let them run safety-related messages periodically on the platforms themselves. SW3 also spoke about working with financial institutions so that they can deter people from withdrawing large sums of money to help their online “boyfriend” stuck in a crisis. This has also been recommended within the existing literature on romance frauds (Cross & Blackshaw, 2015). Awareness efforts of this kind, especially in partnership with dating platforms, can help make more dating platform users aware of the potential risks they face. Finally, it is important that an awareness of such victimisation is raised across multiple institutions, including healthcare and policing services, to reduce stigma around such victimisation. I discuss these in a little more depth in subsequent sections.

#### **7.1.4 Design based interventions**

In addition to the above recommendations, an ANT framework allows us to suggest some further platform-based interventions that may prevent other forms of victimisation. Although these interventions are not drawn directly from the participant narratives, I discuss these measures as flowing from the ANT conceptualisation of the victimisation. As discussed before, in an ANT worldview, all meaning-making is possible due to the interactions between various actants. In Chapter 4, I conceptualised the gay dating platform-related victimisation as ANT networks, highlighting the role of the dating platforms as key actants in bringing about the victimisation. As actants are an integral part of a network, without any key actant, the network, as it is currently assembled, breaks down. As a result, the affordances that have contributed to victimisation might no longer exist, and

victimisation might no longer occur in that specific context. I use this logic to offer some technological design-based interventions/changes that can destabilise the network of some of these forms of victimisation.

Firstly, design-based interventions in the platforms which remove features that prioritise physical attributes (like body type, or height or weight) would go a long way in destabilising the network of discrimination and exclusion on gay dating platforms. Some platforms, like Grindr, financially benefit directly from such exclusionary features, as they offer exclusionary filter features only to paying customers (see Mowlabocus, 2021). Using design to move away from these ways of classifying users will help destabilise the network of exclusion. A good illustration would be platforms like Hinge or Bumble where the design actively seeks to change the perception of desire, inviting people to look at non-physical attributes (Regan, 2021), such as hobbies, interests or personalities. Following their example, dating platform designers can harness the transformative potential of technology and perhaps be (one of the) agents of social change, when they inscribe this intentionality onto the platform-design (see Hutson et al., 2018). However, it needs to be said that piecemeal, publicity-gathering design-based interventions do more harm than good. For example, while Grindr claimed to take an anti-racist stance by removing its ethnicity filter in the wake of #blacklivesmatter protests across US, racial minority groups are now unable to locate people belonging to their own groups on the app, further alienating them (Zhou, 2022).

This logic can also help in formulating interventions to destabilise the network of blackmail, as discussed in Chapter 4. While messaging like “when chatting online, be cautious about what you share” (Grindr, n.d.-c) is common to prevent blackmail, we can move beyond the human actants and think about design-based interventions



that can prevent blackmailing. For example, “disappearing messages”, along the model of Snapchat (see Charteris, 2014), will impede screenshots, and storage of erotic texts and photos. As screen-captured profile information and chats (including nude imagery) are often used by blackmailers to threaten someone with outing (see Boishakh’s story discussed in Chapter 4), this intervention can successfully destabilise the network of blackmail. However, it needs to be acknowledged that although useful, this intervention is not necessarily guaranteed to prevent blackmail, as people may use a different device to capture photos from the chat interface, even when screen-capturing is blocked on the app.

## 7.2 INTERVENTIONS AT STRUCTURAL LEVELS

In Chapter 5, I explained the role of societal queerphobia, sex-negativity and family honour in the network of gay dating platform-related victimisation, and in Chapter 6, I showed the role that shame and disgust play in the network of help-seeking and responding after such experiences. Eliminating these actants will perhaps take the longest, as they are both non-corporeal, and they act systemically through multiple social structures: family, workplace, and neighbourhoods. However, creating enabling conditions for users of gay dating platforms to exercise their *thick desire* free from violence will help counter these actants considerably. Hence, I concur with the participants and call for publicly funded enabling conditions to be made available to support users of gay dating platforms.

Many participants’ reflections illustrated their aspirations for a more sex-positive and queer inclusive society. Holly, Aranyak, Kartik and Nicks felt that societal change in India leading to acceptance of queer sexualities can help prevent many forms of victimisation on gay dating platforms. Aranyak believed that “these [victimisation] incidents happen in homophobic society because people are afraid of

reporting the incident. So, unless this homophobia is done away with, people will be afraid of reporting, and people will keep perpetrating these frauds”. Reflecting on societal queerphobia, Holly felt that “on cultural, anthropological level, there needs to be a lot of change in the mindset of people...and the government needs to be more acknowledging of the presence of the [queer] community”. Nicks spoke about structural queerphobia in the workplace: “very few organisations are willing to employ out LGBTQ people, because there’s a deep-rooted homophobia drilled into the Indian psychology” and hoped for a change in the queerphobic work culture. Nicks’ observation corroborates similar findings in the literature which has also reported on queerphobic exclusion and discrimination in workplaces in India (see Bhattacharjee & K, 2022).

Suman and Venu opined that societal sex-positivity will reduce the impact of many of these forms of victimisation and make seeking help easier. Suman said:

I feel the very idea of sex [is a taboo subject] in India. We are so obsessed with the idea of monogamy and sex negativity that I think sex-positivity is the first thing that we have to work on.

Similarly, Venu spoke about sex-negativity among the police and how that deters help-seeking:

Cops are definitely not sex-positive. And this creates a whole traumatising experience altogether. I mean, imagine if I reached out [to the police], [and] there was physical evidence to prove that I have called out the person for sex... it’s going to be traumatising...the shaming of sex is mostly among cis heteronormative groups...cops are also part of this heteronormative structure.

Indeed, sex-positivity will invariably lead to a reduction in incidents of victimisation through gay dating platforms, and disclosure of sexual behaviour will not be such a significant threat to a person's job, housing, and family support. Scholars of Queer Criminology have argued for research to look into the productive potential of shame (Ball, 2016). Considering such an argument in the present research, one way to reduce structural disgust would be for society to embrace the shame associated with non-normative queer sex. Such acknowledgement would help de-sanitise the Indian queer movement, reducing disgust for non-normative sexual practices, and paving the way for non-judgmental support for people who face victimisation related to gay dating platforms. One way to do this is by introducing sexuality education in institutions, which I discuss below.

### **7.2.1 Comprehensive sexuality education**

To increase social acceptance and understanding of queer sexualities, a number of participants spoke of introducing comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in educational institutions as a more concrete measure that can be taken to increase sex-positivity and decrease queerphobia in general. CSE has been defined as “an age-appropriate, culturally relevant approach to teaching about sex and relationships by providing scientifically accurate, realistic, non-judgemental information” (Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues [TARSHI], 2019, p. 11). Nicks said that “in school [and] college level, if children are taught that you don't have to react in a bad way to see a gay couple, then I think things will improve”. Similarly, Paras opined that “our [school] curriculum needs to include examples of diverse genders and sexualities. Then children, teachers and parents can learn together”. There has been a growing body of research on the importance of including queer people in school curricula to reduce bullying and increase inclusion of queer people in society

(see Gillett-Swan & van Leent, 2019; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015).

Additionally, participants who faced unwanted sex spoke of the need for CSE, with an explicit focus of queer sex and “consent” in it. Holly, for example, said:

any sort of structural reform that needs to happen is from the school itself, that young teenagers [should be] taught sex education in schools. Also—I mean—just to educate young teenagers about consent: what is acceptable what is not [is important] ...actually, my knowledge [of sex] came from pornography rather than some constructive educational ways, in which I could have been more aware, being more cautious and conscious as well—both—while dealing with aspects of sex. So, sex education is very basic.

The role of CSE, including sex education, has been widely recognised in India as a sound strategy in addressing rape culture, educating people about consent and increasing sex-positivity (see Chakravarti, 2011; Das, 2014; Ismail et al., 2015; Tripathi & Sekher, 2013). Sex-Positive Criminology scholars have also highlighted the importance of CSE not only in prevention of sexual assault, but also in reducing queerphobic stigma in society (see Wodda & Panfil, 2020, p. 70). In India, implementing CSE is challenging because of resistance and backlash from conservative stakeholders (see TARSHI, 2019). Nevertheless, working towards this end will help reduce societal queerphobia and sex-negativity considerably.

### **7.3 INTERVENTIONS AT INSTITUTIONAL LEVELS**

In addition to the implementation of CSE, which would ideally bring about gradual social change, some specific recommendations about the institutions involved in offering help and support to victimised users of gay dating platforms also emerged from the interviews. In this section, I enumerate these reformative

aspirations of the participants relating to the institutions of healthcare and the criminal justice system.

### **7.3.1 Queer-affirmative and sex-positive counselling services**

Among other changes desired by participants, the wider availability of non-judgmental and free counselling services was a key suggestion. The medical knowledge framework in India is “colonial...cisgendered, cissexual and heteronormative” (Kottai, 2022, p. 4). Undoubtedly, participants felt that there is a need for more queer-affirmative and affordable mental health services. Venu, for example, felt that “any sort of psychosocial support would help”. Paras and Ravi felt that it is difficult to talk to anyone about victimisation experienced through a gay dating platform. Ravi explained:

if I will tell someone...my parents, friends, siblings as well, maybe they won't understand, they won't counsel me. And if you're not talking to anyone, when you have something in your heart, it will impact your mental health. So counselling, it's really important, because [the counsellors] will understand you.

Speaking about his lack of awareness as to the availability of queer-affirmative mental health practitioners in India, Malik highlighted the need for such counselling services to be well advertised and free, so that they are accessible for all. Similarly, Suman said “I was definitely not expecting [counsellors] to be empathetic towards me and understand what I went through...so I did not reach out”. These quotes suggest that not only is there a need for free, well-advertised queer-affirmative mental health services, but also, an assurance that such services are non-judgmental.

Literature based in India has highlighted the prevalence of several queer-negative mental health practices (Kalra, 2012; Kottai, 2022; Majumder & Kar, 2021;

Ranade & Chakravarty, 2016). Queer sexualities have been de-pathologized unequivocally by the Indian medical community as recently as 2018 (Indian Psychiatric Society [IPS], 2020). Nevertheless, queer-negative “curative” therapies continue in India (see Hindustan Times [HT] correspondent, 2020; India Today Web Desk, 2019; Pal, 2022). Only on September 2, 2022, upon being directed by The Bombay High Court, did the National Medical Commission declare all conversion practices undertaken by medical professionals as professional misconduct under its regulations (Bagchi, 2022).

The above discussion highlights the need for more queer-affirmative mental health services in India. A queer-affirmative mental health service has been argued to follow a rights-based intersectional approach, and not treat LGBTQIA+ mental health as inherently medical issues (see Kottai, 2022). Several community-based organisations have prepared databases and lists that provide contact details of the limited number of queer-affirmative mental health service providers in India (Pink List India, 2020; Varta Trust, n.d.). More of these services are needed to cater sufficiently to the mental health needs of the queer community in India. Moreover, queerphobic biases present in the medical framework need to be challenged and reformed (Kottai, 2022).

In the context of gay dating platform-related victimisation, as there is a strong discourse around victim-blaming (see Chapter 6), it is important that counselling services specify their queer-affirmative and sex-positive stance clearly, so that some of the apprehensions around judgement and prejudice are dispelled. Additionally, intersectoral collaborations in LGBTQIA+ mental healthcare, involving development of joint initiatives by health and other government bodies, along with voluntary and non-profit groups, have been proposed for creating a safer space for queer people

seeking mental health care (Majumder & Kar, 2021, p. 429). Such intersectoral approaches can work well in the context of gay dating platform-related victimisation, as collaborations between the police, legal, and counselling services will make service delivery more efficient. In the next section, I discuss some recommendations towards making the criminal justice system queer friendly.

### **7.3.2 Sensitising the police and publicising such sensitisation programs**

Another specific recommendation that emerged from the interviews related to reforming the queerphobic police culture and the perception of police among the community. This is because, when faced with a crime, the police act as the first point of response for most people. However, as discussed in Chapter 6, many participants said that they did not approach the police as they feared judgment (Aranyak), victim-blaming (Suman, Tushar), and lack of empathy (Suman, Karan). Some participants themselves had negative interactions with the police, where the police morally schooled them and extorted money from them (Venu). Hence, sensitising the police towards queer issues in general, and gay dating platform-related crimes in particular, can help reduce police harassment of people who have faced victimisation in this context. This work is already being carried out by many NGOs and support organisations in many parts of the country (see, for example, Times News Network, 2020). Support worker 1 explained how their organisation has been working for the last twenty years to sensitise the police to the needs of the queer community:

Our advocacy team person...has been advocating at police stations. So, he is in touch with most of the police stations in Mumbai and he's been advocating with them on a regular basis; he makes them aware about the needs of the community: what issues they face and how the community has been harassed, because even the law enforcement

[officials] harass people from the community. So, to bring awareness, he has been working very tirelessly with the police, police academy, police stations about advocating such issues. So, most of the police stations know him very well. So, if a person wants to go to a police station to file a case or an FIR [police complaint], he accompanies the victim always.

Support worker 2 explained that the police culture has been changing steadily since the 2013 judgment when the Delhi High Court first decriminalised gay sex, and now that the Supreme Court has also affirmed the position, the police are more aware of the queer community and its experiences:

Before 2013—this was my personal experience—when I was in Pune that time, we literally had to explain to not just the police officers, but to every officer what section 377 is. But at least after 2013,<sup>19</sup> we didn't have to do it, because they knew what section 377 is and what is LGBTQ community. Especially in [big] cities, it is very common...to see a gay person or to see community representation across the spectrum. But yeah, in very rare cases we [still] have to explain to them what the community is. It might happen in a small town or city that you have to explain these things to the police officer, but I think they're quite okay and supportive in many of the cases.

In addition to such sensitisation work, for the public perception to change, the publicization of such measures is important. Only then would people feel hopeful

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<sup>19</sup> In 2013, the Supreme Court of India had overturned a previous Delhi High court judgment which had decriminalised gay sex. This judgment was severely criticised and widely covered by the media, making the queer community and section 377 more visible in India. It was this judgment that was overturned by the Supreme Court in 2018, legalising gay sex, once and for all (see Mandal, 2018).



enough to go to the police when they face a crime via a gay dating platform. The easiest strategies to change the perception, to borrow from other jurisdictions, would be having LGBTQIA+ liaison officers in police stations (see Bartkowiak-Theron, 2012; Dwyer, 2014; Goldberg et al., 2019), displaying a pride flag or banner in police stations, and conducting outreach programs with the community. Although these approaches have been developed and had varied successes in the West, they might also work in India in this context. This is because similar pro-LGBTQIA+ strategies that developed in the West, have worked in other contexts in India, to at least create a positive awareness of queer identities and rights. For example, in India, multinational companies have used rainbow signage, ad-films and other sensitisation programs to create a culture of allyship within their organisations (see Venugopalan, 2019). However, India's socio-cultural background also needs to be taken into consideration, so that identity-based language does not alienate people who use gay dating platforms but do not identify with any concrete sexual identity. Hence, any such initiatives, nomenclature, or programs need to involve extensive consultation with the community, and must reflect the local context.

### **7.3.3 Alternative reporting and redressal mechanisms**

As mentioned previously, many participants spoke about the difficulty or inability to report the incident. In this section, I explain some of the specific aspirations that participants had with regard to making the criminal justice system more accessible and supportive.

#### ***Third-party and online reporting***

The discomfort and apprehension of approaching a police station on one's own, and fear of police prejudice, can be reduced considerably with third-party reporting services, which could work along with the police stations to start an investigation

into an incident (see Fitch-bartlett & Healy, 2022). As SW1 and SW3 recounted, their organisation already provides for such services, sometimes in terms of accompanying people to the police station or registering the complaint on their behalf. Such services would work to dispel anxieties around police prejudice or humiliating treatment at the police station, as discussed in detail in Chapter 6. Publicising such services is also important, as some studies based in the UK have noted that many people would not access third party reporting services because of lack of awareness (Fitch-bartlett & Healy, 2022). Needless to say, such services need to be adequately funded and staffed to be effective (Chakraborti et al., 2014; Donovan et al., 2019; Fitch-bartlett & Healy, 2022).

Additionally, as discussed in Chapter 6, many participants spoke about their low trust in the police and the State, owing to their inefficiency. As such, increasing trust in the criminal justice system is important. As noted in Chapter 6, Rajveer did not receive any response after emailing the cyber cell of the local police. Rajveer said,

if something, at least even if the cyber cell was active, it would have been a huge hope for me. [Perpetrators] are not scared, there is no accountability mechanism. Anyone can do anything, and there are no consequences...so I think law and order needs to be activated here.

An efficient online reporting mechanism can be implemented to allay people's apprehension of not being taken seriously.

### ***Confidential information-only reporting***

SW2 spoke about the difficulty in reporting when victims/survivors are not willing to get involved. He said:

It is very difficult for me as an individual or as an organization to register a case because, even if the case gets registered in the police station, tomorrow, the court will ask me “where are the victims?” They will not entertain the [support] organisation. They will tell me that “show me the victim who has faced this incident and then we can take further action”.

Participants, on the other hand, spoke about the need for confidentiality when informing the police, owing to queerphobia embedded in social structures including families, neighbourhoods, and workplaces. For example, Ravi spoke about the need for police reports to have an option of anonymity:

...if you ask, you know, to the police station, like I want this [reporting to be] anonymous, then they should [allow for it to be] anonymous. If you want that, “I need my complete name, it should not be anonymous”, then it should not be anonymous. That is completely as per our choice.

Confidential reporting mechanisms would be useful for those who are not looking to file a full police report. This has also been suggested in the literature on crime reporting by queer people (Leonard et al., 2008) and incidents involving sexual assault (Sable et al., 2006). Such confidential reporting can be helpful for the police to receive information about wrongdoing, even when the complainant does not want a full investigation.

Some participants indeed did not want to go through a criminal trial. For example, Malik felt deterred by the time that a trial takes, and the costs of litigation:

you know, court hearings could take years and of course, [people] don't have that kind of time, because we come from a middle-class

background, and we don't want our lives to be, you know, stuck in the courtroom. Cases can take literally years. And these are like very expensive things to do. And I didn't want to go through all that.

Alternative forms of redressing crimes can help increase the efficiency of responding to wrongdoing. As Karan's and Nick's actions after victimisation show (see Chapter 6), many people might not want perpetrators to go to prison. Instead, they would prefer to pursue other remedies, like recovery of stolen goods or admonishing the perpetrators. Helping people with such informal remedies, instead of traditional criminal proceedings, would preclude people from having to go through harrowing, time-consuming and expensive court processes. Moreover, not having to appear in court regularly as a prosecution witness reduces the risk of questioning by family or workplace and reduces the risk of outing.

#### **7.3.4 Holistic community policing centres to act as a first point of contact**

In this section, I bring together the recommendations, especially the institutional ones, by proposing that community policing could potentially work well in India to address many of the issues highlighted above. Community policing is a philosophy according to which the police and private citizens work together in creative ways to “solve contemporary community problems related to crime, fear of crime, disorder and neighbourhood decay” (Mohanty & Mohanty, 2014, p. 6). Community policing initiatives have been taken up in various states of India to tackle a number of issues, broadly aiming to improve police services and increase people's trust in the police. For example, 65 slums in Mumbai set up “slum police *panchayats*” made up of representatives of the slums and a local police officer, to act as a bridge between the slums and the police (see Roy et al., 2004). They undertake a wide range of functions including patrolling the slum and resolving and de-escalating

disputes (Roy et al., 2004). Similarly, the “*Janamaitri Suraksha Project*” in Kerala is a community policing initiative started by the Kerala state government, which is a police station-level body consisting of police personnel and representatives of the community, which partners with other agencies, to deliver police services to citizens (Kumar, 2012). Services include night patrolling, coordinating with private security agencies, resolving family disputes, and running victim support centres (see Kumar, 2012). Such initiatives have helped to increase citizens’ trust in the police among the community (see Mishra, 2011; Kumar, 2012).

The literature on the efficacy of community policing programs has reported that such programs are associated with increased trust in the police, a reduction in the fear of crime, and increasing job satisfaction among the police (Crowl, 2017; Kumar, 2012; Mishra, 2011). However, community policing has not been linked to any significant reduction in crime (Crowl, 2017; MacDonald, 2002). So, the recommendation on developing a community policing initiative needs to be understood as one with potentially more value for helping crime victims/survivors.

Along these lines, an LGBTQIA+ community policing initiative can be set up in partnership with the State governments and the police to cater to the recommendations highlighted by the participants in this project. Suman, Venu and Karan felt that having a supportive community after facing a crime “definitely helps” (Venu). Karan wanted a dedicated LGBTQIA+ cell to be established by the government:

if there is something, you know, a central government body, where people can go...with their troubles and talk about them freely with educated and qualified and experienced people, whether it’s a

psychiatrist, or whether it's, you know, sexual health expert or legal expert...[it's] going to help a lot.

Paras suggested something similar:

like in some states, we have women's cell, that deal with atrocities against women, I feel we need cells specially dedicated to these cases as well. So, if someone faces such a situation, they would know immediately where to go, and get guidance as to where to file a complaint, what to do, etc. Because I have read in newspapers that the police does not take these incidents seriously.

Suman wished for a similar system in place:

I wish I could work with some people to create a support system and help those who are in need – like an SOS kind of thing where if they are in need [of] support, they can immediately get in touch with us and get the support they need.

Some states in India already have Transgender Protection Cells at the state level set up as per the stipulations of *The Transgender Persons Act, 2019*, and *The Transgender Persons, Rules, 2020* (see for example, Asian News International, 2021; The Hindu, 2022). Transgender Protection Cells are tasked with monitoring crimes against transgender people and ensuring speedy registration and investigation of such crimes. A similar initiative aimed at addressing crimes and violence against other members of the queer community, and specifically gay dating platform-related crimes, could be possible. Such an initiative will allow community members to work with the police, increase trust in the police, and increase the efficiency of service delivery (see Mishra, 2011; Kumar, 2012). As with Transgender Protection Cells and other community policing initiatives, this initiative must have ample representation

from LGBTQIA+ community-based organisations that are already working on this issue. Such community representation may allay fear of police prejudice or victim-blaming and improve the perception of the police among people who face gay dating platform-related crimes.

As with other community policing programmes, it will be crucial for the initiative to partner with support organisations, including queer-affirmative mental health practitioners and listening services, outlined earlier. Although the exact composition and functions of such a programme in various states ought to be developed by the communities themselves, participants suggested some key aspects to keep in mind while implementing such a scheme, which I discuss below.

Some participants spoke about not being aware of the legal and non-legal recourses available to them after a victimisation experience (Rajveer, Tushar). It is therefore important that such a community policing service is publicised, perhaps in partnership with gay dating platforms themselves. Helpline numbers, websites, and addresses can be clearly advertised on the dating platforms. Next, as discussed above, some participants wanted to pursue non-legal remedies. Respecting individual needs and assisting people with such remedies would be an important aspect of the role of community policing. Many participants discussed their unwillingness or inability to come out as a barrier to seek help or redress (SW2, SW3, Nicks). Maintenance of confidentiality of complainants would help in alleviating such fears. Lastly, as mentioned before, it is important that when addressing gay dating platform-related crimes, websites or promotional material use appropriate language that focuses on the usage of gay dating platforms, and not the sexual/gender identities. For example, terms like “crimes relating to gay dating platforms” ought to be used, instead of “crimes affecting LGBTQIA+ identified individuals” on dating

platforms. Overall, community policing centres can potentially help provide streamlined, efficient and non-judgmental support to people who have faced gay dating platform-related crimes and improve their overall experience with the criminal justice system. Hence, as mentioned above, there are clearly ways in which such services can be designed to address the concerns raised by participants in this study, while also responding to their needs.

#### **7.4 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I highlighted the hopes and aspirations of participants around the prevention of gay dating platform-related victimisation and how better support could be offered to users who have faced such victimisation. This answered the fourth research question (RQ4): How can gay dating platform-related victimisation be prevented/addressed? I used Sex-Positive Criminological theory (Wodda & Panfil, 2020) to highlight queer people's right to have unbridled access to sexual expression without fear of violence and called for the creation of enabling conditions for safer queer socio-sexual interactions. Towards this end, I recommended interventions at technological, social, and institutional levels.

Given the networked nature of victimisation, the recommendations must be targeted at disrupting the said networks. Using the ANT framework, I targeted key institutional and technological actants that played a major role in victimisation, as shown in the previous chapters. I explained how gay dating platforms taking active measures, like verifying and screening profiles, assisting with finding blocked profiles of perpetrators, and disseminating information about support services (like medical and legal services), can destabilise the network of victimisation in some contexts. I also suggested that some design-based technological interventions can reduce the likelihood of some types of victimisation such as exclusion or blackmail.



Next, in line with participant's aspirations, I recommended the implementation of comprehensive sexuality education in schools and colleges to target the key actants of structural queerphobia and sex-negativity across multiple social structures. I further offered specific recommendations relating to key service-delivery institutions: queer-affirmative counselling services for people who have faced victimisation; sensitising the police; and alternative crime reporting and redressal mechanisms. I posited that these measures at structural and institutional levels can help destabilise the networks that produce or reinforce secondary victimisation of those who have experienced gay dating platform-related victimisation. Finally, I recommended the formation of community policing centres in states to streamline service delivery to people who have experienced gay dating platform-related victimisation in India. In the next chapter I provide a conclusion to the thesis and establish suggestions for future research in this field.

# Chapter 8: Conclusion

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In this chapter, I summarise the aims, questions, and findings of the thesis. I draw out the main threads connecting the chapters by revisiting and synthesising the main arguments advanced in the analyses in Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7. I then discuss the empirical and theoretical contributions of this project. Finally, I suggest avenues for future research in this area. I end the chapter with some personal reflections on the thesis.

## 8.1 THESIS SUMMARY

The thesis set out to address the research problem regarding the dearth of empirical evidence on gay dating platform-related victimisation in the Indian context.

To explore this problem, I developed the following research questions:

- RQ1. What forms of victimisation are experienced by the users of gay dating platforms in India, in what contexts do they occur, and what factors play a role in such victimisation?
- RQ2. What are the consequences and impacts of gay dating platform-related victimisation?
- RQ3. How do the users of gay dating platforms respond to victimisation and what challenges do they face in doing so?
- RQ4. How can gay dating platform-related victimisation be prevented or addressed?

In order to answer these questions, I drew from semi-structured interviews with 14 people who faced gay dating platform-related victimisation in India, and 3 support workers working in this field in Mumbai and Bengaluru.

When exploring the first research question (RQ1) across Chapters 4 and 5, it became apparent that there were at least 11 forms of victimisation that participants faced across different phases of interactions on gay dating platforms. People recounted experiencing exclusionary and discriminatory practices, violation of privacy, blackmail, and romance frauds through their use of dating platforms, even before meeting other users in-person. After meeting another user in-person, participants recounted experiencing catfishing, extortion and attempts of extortion, queerphobic hate crimes, violation of private space, image-based sexual abuse, unwanted sex, and “friends with benefits” fraud. As part of these analyses, I also highlighted the ways that experiences of victimisation were caused and sustained by the dating platforms themselves (including their specific affordances) and socio-political factors like queerphobia and sex-negativity.

In response to the second research question (RQ2), in Chapter 6, I reported on the wide range of participants’ experiences in response to gay dating platform-related victimisation. These responses included: feelings of shock, trauma, and shame; experiencing guilt and self-blame; developing a distrust towards other users; and often leading to a reduction or discontinuation of dating platform use. I found that shame and guilt played a major role in how people felt after victimisation, leading to self-blame and reluctance in seeking help.

In the same chapter, in response to the third research question (RQ3), I discussed that many participants took measures on an individual level to redress the wrongs that they had experienced and to prevent their own future victimisation. They often sought help from friends, queer acquaintances, and community-based support organisations. It was also clear that participants experienced some significant challenges in accessing help from formal or informal sources after victimisation.

Most of these challenges arose from structural and institutional disgust for queer sexualities, desire, and non-normative sexual expression. These experiences led participants to also discuss their views on the necessary interpersonal, institutional, and structural changes necessary to prevent victimisation and to enhance support for those who may have experienced victimisation. These views provided a response to the fourth research question (RQ4), that I discussed in Chapter 7.

## **8.2 EMPIRICAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

This thesis makes several empirical contributions to the field of research on dating platform-related harms and crimes. Primarily, the thesis offers insights into the kinds of harms or crimes experienced by users of gay dating platforms, and elucidates the contexts in which these experiences take place. Given the limited existing research in this space, particularly in an Indian context, the thesis contributes to this empirical gap.

More specifically, this study is one of the first studies focusing on the “queer subject” and their experiences of victimisation conducted in India after the decriminalisation of gay sex. Prior to decriminalisation, much of the criminological and legal scholarship on queer subjects was focused on State harassment and oppression and the constitutional unsustainability of the colonial queerphobic law. While the reading down of the law by the Supreme Court is a landmark moment in the history of queer liberation in India, this research demonstrates that queer people have not yet attained substantive equity before the crimino-legal system. I demonstrate this by highlighting queer people’s inability to seek help from the police for fear of interpersonal harassment, being ‘outed’, and by noting their lack of trust in the crimino-legal system. Such findings empirically contribute to the scholarship on reporting barriers faced by queer people in India.

Additionally, in this project, I demonstrate the harms that structural queerphobia and (queer) sex-negativity continue to cause to queer people in India. I show how some dating platform related crimes partially depend on structural queerphobia and sex-negativity by threatening to “out” people, knowing that outing can have repercussions within that person’s family, on their housing situation, and in their workplace. As such, this project highlights the connections between dating platforms, crimes and prejudice that run across multiple structures, including the criminal justice system, housing, families and workplaces. This insight can inform future studies on queer and other marginalised communities and ensure that advocacy for societal change remains a focus of crime/harm prevention measures.

### **8.3 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

This research also makes several theoretical contributions. In this project, I employed Actor-Network Theory as an analytical method (Van der Wagen, 2019) to uncover the covert roles that non-human actors (technological and socio-political) play in the victimisation experienced by users of gay dating platforms, and in creating barriers to help-seeking after such victimisation. In Chapter 4, I conceptualised each form of victimisation as an ANT network, sustainable through a stable assemblage of, and interactions between, both human users and the various features and affordances of gay dating platforms. In Chapter 5, I continued conceptualising other forms of victimisation relating to gay dating platforms as ANT networks, and highlighted the role of societal queerphobia, sex negativity and family honour in causing and sustaining these. In this way, I used ANT to shift the discourse from human actors and their actions/inactions to the platforms themselves, which invite, enable, and afford these types of victimisation. ANT also allowed me to focus on non-corporeal socio-political factors, like queerphobia, sex-negativity that caused

victimisation and structural disgust that impeded help-seeking. Such conceptualisation of victimisation and help-seeking behaviours as ANT networks allowed me to recommend prevention strategies and support measures targeting the technological and socio-political factors underpinning these forms of victimisation in Chapter 7. I conceptualised such recommendations as strategies that can destabilise the network of victimisation, and the network of secondary victimisation after it. As such this thesis uses ANT innovatively to conceptualise victimisation in a digital age as products of human and non-human agents, including technology and socio-political factors. Such an approach has not been taken in previous studies in Queer Criminology, Sex-Positive Criminology or Digital Criminology. Future research can use this similar approach to locate technological and socio-political reasons behind victimisation in a digital society.

This thesis also offers empirical evidence to further the fields of Digital Criminology and Queer Criminology. Across Chapters 4 and 5, I demonstrated that many forms of gay dating platform-related victimisation are neither purely digital or embodied in nature, and that they usually contain both digital and embodied elements. This furthers the proposition outlined by Digital Criminology scholars that in a digital society, most interactions are network activities, and are neither purely digital nor purely embodied (Stratton et al., 2017). Additionally, scholars in Queer Criminology have maintained that queer people experience crimes and the criminal justice system differently than non-queer people (Ball, 2014b; Dalton, 2016). The experiences discussed in this thesis further this argument in the specific context of India. I demonstrated that in many cases, users of gay dating platforms are specifically targeted by perpetrators because societal queerphobia, sex-negativity, and family honour make it difficult or unlikely that they will seek help. This

specifically disadvantages queer people and provides useful insights upon which Queer Criminology can build.

I also used Sex-Positive Criminology to guide this study and the recommendations produced from it. I firstly employed Sex-Positive Criminology to substantiate the focus on structural, institutional, and socio-political factors (see Wodda & Panfil, 2020; p. 11) that play a role in gay dating platform-related victimisation. As such, this project built upon Wodda and Panfil's (2018, p. 599) argument that structures and institutions play covert roles in making access to support difficult for people, such as gay dating platform users, who are involved in the political act of "wanting". I returned to Sex-Positive Criminology in Chapter 7, where I foregrounded the aspirations of the users of dating platforms and called for broader queer-inclusive structural changes across educational institutions, policing and mental health service providers. I embedded these recommendations in Sex-Positive Criminology by highlighting these as measures to safeguard people's right to express their "thick desire" free from violence (Wodda & Panfil, 2020). As such, this thesis furthers the arguments of Sex-Positive Criminology in a specific empirical context, and shows how a sex-positive criminological lens can help prevent multiple forms of victimisation against queer people.

#### **8.4 FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN RESEARCH**

This research is an exploratory study into the experiences of victimisation faced by users of gay dating platforms in India. As one of the first studies on this topic in India, this study has only scratched the surface of the issue. This means that there is further empirical work that is possible in this space. While this project builds empirical evidence of such victimisation in India, its focus is still limited to the experiences of fourteen people who faced such incidents and three support workers.

Future research can build on the foundation established by this thesis and examine these issues with a larger number of participants. Secondary data in the form of transcripts from court cases or reported incidents recorded by NGOs, civil societies, or police stations might be rich additional sources of data for such projects.

Moreover, future projects involving interviews with offenders might provide unique insights of their own. As this project deals with victimisation experiences, it foregrounds victim/survivor voices in building evidence of gay dating platform-related crimes and harms. The perspective of the offenders can bring to light their unique motivations for using gay dating platforms as a medium for offending. This could be achieved by interviewing people who have been convicted of such offences, or by examining the transcripts of court cases where such offenders have been prosecuted. In some cases, especially when it relates to harms like exclusionary practices or catfishing, where there are chances of non-intentional wrongdoing, the perspectives of the perpetrators might help in understanding the phenomena in more depth. Further, as I followed a self-selecting sample, intersectional victimisation experiences along the lines of caste or religion could not be explored. Future research could look at intersectional experiences of victimisation related to gay dating platforms in India, particularly where caste, class and religion may be important factors. This is especially important given the multiplicity of intersectional experiences that people have reported on digital spaces like gay dating platforms.

In this research, I used ANT to locate actants or factors that play a covert role in victimisation. I located technological as well as socio-political factors that played key mediating roles in victimisation. As my research is an exploratory study and, as such, reported on a variety of crimes and harms enabled or facilitated by gay dating platforms, I did not have enough data to chart all the actants in each victimisation



network. Hence, I focused on the mediating actants that were unique to the context of gay dating platform-related interactions. Each category of crime/harm would have their own extensive set of actants and would benefit from individual ANT maps that chart all such actants (for an example of an ANT map, see Hinduja, 2012) for devising situational crime-prevention strategies. Such an endeavour, though important, was not feasible within the scope of this study. Future research dealing with one or two types of gay dating platform-related harm or crime can draw more extensive ANT maps in order to more deeply understand those specific forms of victimisation.

## **8.5 CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

Growing up in India in the 90s, I did not have access to many queer “spaces”: both physical and metaphorical. Gay dating platforms provided me the avenue for the first time to engage with other queer people. It was through these engagements with other queer people that I met digitally and in-person through gay dating platforms, that I had my initiation into queer ways of thinking and living, beyond queer sex. Many of our brief conversations would involve affective lamentations of collective unhappiness toward the government on being labelled criminals, reflections on navigating invisibility and hypervisibility in a heterosexist society, sharing thoughts on the lack of understanding from families, and hoping for a better future. It is here that I also met community activists, and started receiving invitations to community events in Kolkata. Hence, in some ways, gay dating platforms have been instrumental in bringing me “closer” to the queer community: physically, emotionally and politically. When I experienced victimisation after meeting someone from a gay dating platform in Noida, which involved catfishing, assault, and extortion, I promptly put it down to my lack of diligence in not video-calling the

perpetrator beforehand. I did not reflect much over that experience, till I started coming across similar experiences. Upon hearing similar victimisation experiences from others, I realised the scale and started thinking about the collective nature of the problem, in that gay dating platform users were being specifically targeted. It is here that I thought of this topic as my PhD project—a topic that affects me both personally as well as politically.

During my fieldwork, upon listening to other people’s experiences of victimisation, I realised that minimisation and self-blame are the easiest, although not the most accurate, ways of making sense of such victimisation. Hence, shifting the discourse in this project, from people (who face victimisation) to the institutions that covertly facilitate such incidents, has been cathartic to me as a queer researcher and transformative of how I perceived my own previous victimisation. Secondly, being able to offer a (safe) space for people to talk about their victimisation has also been deeply meaningful to me, as there truly are not enough safe spaces for people to share such experiences without fear of judgment and victim-blaming. Finally, building upon the theories of Queer Criminology and Sex-Positive Criminology and calling for queer-inclusive structural changes in society through this thesis have also been political work for me. For Belknap (2015, p.14), activist criminological research “encompasses research that assists victims...as well as educates...police, and other criminal legal system professionals”. This research project clearly aligns with these aims from the perspectives of gay dating platform users in India. Creating a safe space for gay dating platform users to talk about their victimisation, building clear evidence of victimisation, analysing their narratives for structural and institutional failings in those contexts, and foregrounding platform-users’ hopes and aspirations in recommending queer-affirmative social change have all been affective

activism for me. I believe this, and more such work within queer and sex-positive criminological traditions, will raise awareness, shape better policies, and create a just and equitable society for marginalised communities.

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# Appendices

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## Appendix A

### Interview Schedule for people who have faced victimisation

#### Consent

1. What is your understanding of what we will be talking about today?

[Ensuring that participants understand and can reflect back in their own words that we will be talking about their experience with crimes, its impact on their lives and challenges faced in reporting such incidents. Will read through information sheet to the participant then]

2. Having been read and understood all of the risks associated with this interview, are you happy to participate in the interview process? (yes/no)

[If yes, will continue with interview. If no, will thank the individual and hang up or end the interview. If unsure, will offer to reschedule or giving them a moment to think about it or reschedule the interview]

3. Do you consent to this interview being audio recorded? (yes/no)

[If no, will explain that it is not possible to proceed as we need to be able to listen back to the audio recording to confirm details]

4. Do you have any questions before we start?

If yes, will answer questions as possible and/or offer to provide answers at a later date and as the best way to do so [repeat]

#### Rapport building questions

Firstly, can you please tell me a little bit about yourself (family, work, etc)  
[Will remind the participant to try to use as less identifying details as possible, but that it is okay if it happens unintentionally].

#### About criminal victimisation

[Will remind the participant that they can ask to skip any question at any time. If they want to take a break or finish up with the interview, they have to just let me know. We will discuss how the participant would like to handle a situation of distress during the interview, I will follow their advice].

1. Can we begin by you telling me as much of the crime incident(s) as you are comfortable with? [If they want to talk about more than one incident, will go through them one by one]

[Minimal encouragers would be used, signs of distress will be watched for].

Depending on the answer, and after asking if they are comfortable with elaborating on these, the following questions may or may not be relevant for each criminal incident experienced:

- How did the incident unfold? (one transaction/multiple transactions)?
- How long did you know the perpetrator? (Were you chatting for some days, etc)
- What happened after the incident?
- Have you told anyone about the incident(s)?

### **Impact of the crime**

1. How has the incident affected your use of online dating platforms?
2. Did the incident have any impact on other areas of your life?
  - Physical health
  - Emotional health
  - Relationships
  - Employment
  - Other areas

### **Support**

1. Have you received any support from your family/friends regarding the incident?
2. Have you received any formal support (doctor, counsellor) regarding the incident?
3. What support would have been most helpful at the time?
4. What support would be most helpful now?

### **Reporting**

1. Have you thought about reporting the incident to the police?
2. If yes, what was your experience?
  - Do you feel like your experience was taken seriously?
  - Do you feel like the response was open and transparent?
  - Was there anyone who was not helpful?
3. Has there been any outcome to your reporting?

### **Moving forward**



In hindsight, how do you make sense about what happened to you?

### **Awareness**

[depending on the circumstance, these questions may or may not be relevant]

1. Without providing personal details, have you heard of others who have experienced crimes through male same sex digital dating platforms?
2. Did you ever think this could happen to you? Why/why not?

### **Demographics (researcher to complete and note answers)**

1. What is your identified sex and sexual orientation?
2. How old are you?
3. What state do you currently reside in?
4. How long have you been on a male same sex digital dating platform?

### **Conclusion**

1. We are winding up the interview now, is there anything you want to add?
2. Do you have any questions about what happens from now?
3. How are you feeling?  
[an opportunity for the participant to reflect on the interview, will be watching for signs of distress/agitation]
  - a. What do you normally do if you are feeling distressed or agitated?
  - b. Is there someone you usually talk to?
  - c. Do you know if that person is available today?  
[will be reminding them of counselling services available on the information sheet]
4. What are your plans for the rest of the day/week/weekend?  
[will be encouraging the participant to have a plan for the rest of the day, and encourage them to name something specific, will try to identify something that they are looking forward to]

## Appendix B

### Interview schedule for support workers

Thank you for agreeing to do this interview and for sharing your knowledge and experiences with us. [Will give a brief overview of the project, in line with the participant information sheet]

#### Introduction

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself and the kind of work you/your organisation does? [Will remind the participant to try to use as less identifying details as possible, to protect the confidentiality of the persons involved in the cases].

#### Kinds of crimes

Can you please tell me a little bit about the kind of crime cases (perpetrated by strangers or casual acquaintances met on a dating platform) that have come to you or your organisation?

- Who approaches you for seeking support? Victims/survivors themselves? Or someone else?
- Are there similar modus operandi for these crimes, or are most cases different from each other?

#### Support/advocacy

What is your organisation's mandate when it comes to providing support to such crime victims/survivors?

- Helping in official redressing in the form of drafting and filing an FIR (police complaint), etc? (What happens when victims/survivors do not want this?)
- Counselling, listening support services?
- Anything else?

#### Challenges/barriers

1. What challenges/barriers do you face in providing such support services?
  - Legal (letter of the law, police culture, etc)
  - Social (from victims/survivors' family or friends, etc)
2. In addition to the effects of the crime, what challenges/barriers do you think victim/survivors face (when they are on their own) after such crime incidents?
3. What are some of the reforms you would like to propose to improve such experiences and challenges?

#### Crime victims/survivors characteristics

In your professional opinion, do you think there are any common characteristics that are shared by the crime victims/survivors (socio-economic background, ‘out’ or ‘closeted’, urban or rural, etc.)?

Building on from the previous question, do you think any particular groups of people are more vulnerable than others?

➤ Why?

### **Perpetrator characteristics**

In your professional opinion, do you think there are any common characteristics that are shared by the perpetrators (socio-economic background, sexual orientation, etc.)?

While we are on this topic, do you think it is possible at all to identify perpetrator profiles easily on these platforms?

➤ Any obvious red flags that users should look out for?

### **Awareness**

In your professional opinion, do you think there is enough awareness about these among dating platform users? Do you have any suggestions on how this can be improved?

### **Conclusion**

5. We are winding up the interview now, is there anything you want to add?
6. Would you like to receive updates about this project and do you want me to send you a copy of my thesis and any allied publications? [Also informing them that they can access these from the project-Facebook page]
7. Do you have any questions that I can address before we end the interview?

Thank you so much.

## Appendix C

### Facebook Recruitment Post

**Participate in research:** QUT School of Justice PhD researcher wants to hear about your experiences with crimes perpetrated by strangers or casual acquaintances met through digital gay dating platforms in India. Find out more at <https://research.qut.edu.au/ddpii/>. Contact the researcher by sending a message to this page: <https://rb.gy/gf6qst>.

Please share. Please note if you ‘like’ or ‘share’ this Facebook post, it could appear on your Facebook wall and/or timeline, and on your Facebook friends’ newsfeed. So, discretion advised.

If you are interested in participating, please do not comment on this post indicating your interest, as the project deals with sensitive personal narratives, and the contents of this post, including ‘likes’ and ‘comments’ will be visible to members of the public. Instead, send a DM to the Facebook page at <https://rb.gy/gf6qst>.



## Appendix D

### Grindr Recruitment Ad

A rectangular advertisement with a dark grey border. The background is a gradient from orange on the left to light blue on the right. The text is centered and reads:

**Criminology PhD researcher wants to hear about your experiences with crimes committed by someone met via gay dating apps in India.**

**Interviews will be anonymous, via phone and 1 hour long. Interviewees will be given Rs 1000 e-gift cards for their time.**

**Contact the researcher via WhatsApp at +61 [REDACTED]**

**[REDACTED] Click to go to the project website.**