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| Track | Identity |
| Title | Stigmatized Identities and Media in an Atmosphere of Criminality: A Case of Homosexual Individuals in India |
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ABSTRACT

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Summary:

From a country that had a history of acknowledgement of homosexuality, post-colonial India has become a country where homosexuality is a stigma and was a crime until recently. However, homosexuals in India have had to come to terms with their identity with this background and with the help of supplementary sources such as the Internet and media in the absence of conversations related to homosexuality in local culture. India's unique social, legal and cultural framework presents an interesting context to study identity formation as an interaction with media in an atmosphere of taboo, stigma and criminality. We study this phenomenon with Troiden's model of homosexual identity formation as the basis and through a narrative study of interviews with Indian homosexual individuals involving semi-structured interviews.

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INTRODUCTION

“In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity.” (Erik Erikson)

Erikson sums up the criticality and context of identity succinctly in this quote. Identity is a socially constructed concept; the way an individual sees their self being represented in specific social settings, distinguished from the idea of self-concept - which is how people see themselves (Troiden, 1989). Thus, identity becomes one of the most important parameters of self-evaluation as reflected by social settings. For most individuals, the notion of their sexuality and its insinuations are *prima facie* in their private domain and not dictated by the provisos of cultural bindings, however the circumstances stand rather contrasting for homosexuals. Troiden (1989) defines the homosexual identity as seeing a representation of the individual self as a homosexual in romantic or sexual settings. The social nature of the homosexual identity is decidedly governed by prevalent norms of sexuality in a society. This paper looks at the development of homosexual identity using media and the Internet as an interface in the Indian context, highlighting the development of identity at a paradoxical juncture of a thriving yet invisible Internet culture of the LGBTQ+ community.

HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND MEDIA

Many models of homosexual identity development have been proposed over the years including by Cass (1979) and Coleman (1982). Troiden (1989) built on previous models and offered a 4-stage model of homosexual identity development - *Sensitization* upon first exposures to information about homosexuality, *Identity Confusion* when the individual first realizes they might be homosexual themselves, *Identity Assumption* by tolerating and accepting homosexual identity and reaching out to other homosexual individuals, and *Commitment* internally and externally to a homosexual role and lifestyle. Work looking at later models diverges from Troiden's (1989) work (“Chapter 10 Homosexual Identity Formation,” n.d.; Heng, 2007), hence we use this model for our study.

Literature has looked at the role of the Internet and Media in this process of the formation of homosexual identity. Gomillion and Giuliano (Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011) bring out the important influence of media and role models, even negative portrayals, during the Sensitization and Identity Confusion stages. In a study of information-seeking practices of homosexual and bisexual individuals (Bond et al., 2009), the Internet came out at the top as a source of information, along with other media (books, movies etc), as opposed to people. McKenna and Bargh (McKenna and Bargh, n.d.) outline how participating in Internet newsgroups helps homosexual individuals ‘demarginalize’ stigmatized identities by acquiring positive connotations through interactions with similar others, that anonymity allows them to explore and accept uncomfortable aspects of their identity, and participating in online groups makes it easier to accept themselves (Hillier and Harrison, 2007).

THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Ancient Indian texts dating back to the start of the Christian Era have some of the earliest references to homosexuality in the world, and while homosexuality was not always looked upon favourably then, there was also not an active effort made to cure or punish homosexual

behaviour (Roscoe, 1996; Sweet and Zwilling, 1993). In 1864, under the colonial rule, homosexuality was criminalized in India and remained so until September 2018. The existence of this law ascribed not just stigma but also criminal consequences to homosexuality. This puritan mind-set was echoed by visible and popular media and adopted by the traditional community as well. In a highly tight culture (Gelfand et al., 2011) like India with many norms and rules and low tolerance of deviant behaviour, depictions of LGBTQ+ individuals in media have been mostly negative and *caricature-ish*. Asian countries have fairly tight culture, and studies have documented a pervasive culture of homophobia and discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals (Bilgehan Ozturk, 2011), along with studies world over reporting the existence of stigma and discriminatory practices against the community (Chuang et al., 2011; Drydakis, 2009; Martinez et al., 2017). Ozeren (2014) points to social institutions, legal frameworks and cultural norms being the primary bases for discrimination against homosexual individuals, and India has restrictive practices on all the three fronts. This leads to a unique context and opportunity to study the formation of homosexual identity in criminalized and stigmatized contexts, and the role of various media in the process.

RESEARCH METHOD

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in English with 7 homosexual individuals (6 males, 1 female) who grew up in 6 different cities across India and have work experience in cosmopolitan cities. The respondents were selected through purposeful and snowball sampling. All the interviews were audio-recorded, and transcribed for analysis. The interview text is being analysed using narrative analysis, with an awareness of existing theory to identify departure from the literature in the chosen context. While the presence of a female among the respondents allows us to compare and contrast experiences of males and females, as of now we are looking at patterns that emerge in the Indian context based on similarities in experiences.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Sensitization

The stage of Sensitization or first exposures to information about homosexuality depends on the availability of information about homosexuality, and of realizing one's departure from the norm through gender non-confirmatory activities. While gender non-confirmation and a realization of the same was seen to occur in our respondents, due to the criminal connotation associated with homosexuality until 2018, information was not freely available in society for individuals to sensitize.

“We did not have access to you know the Internet. I mean, we had some access, but not the way in which, you know, today, people have readymade, I mean, ready to access kind of knowledge or information...I went to a government school, I did not know anybody else who was either queer themselves, or was talking about it in a way that maybe today, so many people are, you know, it's getting more visible, more people are talking about it, it's got this kind of mainstream visibility, and that was not the case then and this is about 15 years ago.” (Respondent 2)

Mass media acted as a source of information for all of our respondents uniformly. But the experiences with each medium were heterogenous. Portrayals related to homosexuality in India

have usually been caricature-ish. In addition, in India, homosexuality may also be mistaken for transgenderism; something we find to be true for our respondents. The colloquial word for hermaphrodites (a subset that is considered under the transgender umbrella in India) – *hijra* – is used in the derogatory sense in India to tease effeminate males. Two of our respondents reported being teased by such colloquial words. This makes any available information through mass media reinforce heteronormative behaviour since departures from the norm are depicted as being mocked at.

“I feel when Section 377 got modified, many people got to know about it. There are LGBT people who are not hijras [eunuchs]...There was a time I used to think I’m also a hijra because I didn’t know. There is a spectrum...I got to know through the Internet.” (Respondent 7)

And thus, in the case of our respondents, sensitization seems to have been skipped altogether, occurring as purposeful search during identity confusion.

Identity Confusion

This is the stage when individuals seek to answer ‘Am I really homosexual?’ Troiden (1989) lists altered perceptions of self, experiences with arousal, stigma, and inaccurate knowledge as the sources of identity confusion in homosexuals.

The connotations of criminality and associated stigma lead to secrecy and near-impossibility of finding other homosexuals in the vicinity or in local culture in India. This leads to feelings of loneliness, and difficulties in self-categorization because talking about homosexuality presupposes revelation. Here, traditional media such as news and movies seem to have created barriers for our respondents. The respondents uniformly point to the caricatures of gay men in Indian movies.

“The portrayal in movies is mostly...till then it was mostly of a caricature, correct? So they [respondent’s friends] could know that there is nothing like that. You’re just the same.” (Respondent 1)

However, the Internet and newspapers allowed the respondents to identify homosexuality as a legitimate identity. In the absence of role models in the Indian media, this awareness of the availability of others through the Internet seems to have been a positive influence on our respondents, as Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) posited.

“If there was no internet I can’t imagine how my life would have been...Because that initial exploration phase when I was trying to connect. Otherwise it was like ok folks are talking about girls I’m not enjoying it fine. I am liking guys but in what way, how that is where the Internet came in picture. That is where I got the first exposure. That something like this exists. And then the whole journey begins right? And then even if you want to look for the literature or books or movies, anything, Internet is the source right?” (Respondent 5)

Identity Assumption

At this stage, the individual tolerates and accepts the homosexual identity and starts to reach out to other homosexuals. Self-defining as homosexual is key at this stage and it is done by meeting similar others. But for our respondents it seems to have been a case of *disembodied affiliation* (Troiden, 1989), where the person self-defines as homosexual without meeting another homosexual person but by reading about homosexuality – a case that is found to be rare in the West but seems to result from the interplay of criminality and taboo in India, and hence turning to media. Five of our respondents read about homosexuality on the Internet/Newspapers and reconciled the image with their own.

So I realized when I was in around class 9th. So I had a crush on John Abraham...so after that...I read about it in...so that time we used to subscribe for Hindustan Times. So Hindustan Times on the Sunday magazine, it had a page called The Zeitgeist. So in that page every time there was something about alternate sexuality. And I read about it in class 8 and 9th and I could relate to it. (Respondent 1)

Online communities and social media helped our respondents in *stigma management* – a characteristic of this stage – which seems to have occurred through *passing* (pretending to be heterosexual) and/or *group alignment* (immersing in the homosexual community), which happened in the real and virtual worlds respectively.

“If I pretend to be straight, I am lying...Laughing at lame women sexual jokes, to fit in...After coming home, that was the real me, when I was chatting with like-minded [gay] people. I was two different people in just 24 hours.” (Respondent 7)

Commitment

In terms of commitment, which is acceptance and commitment of the role and lifestyle of a homosexual (Troiden, 1989), 4 of our respondents have come out to their families with varying degrees of acceptance. Popular and new media such as the news and Internet-streamed content helped two of the respondents start conversations with their family to come to terms with their homosexual identity.

“There was this one web series that came out about two girls in the 1990s who fell in love with each other. And that story was very similar to mine...two girls from middle class families going to college together, and how it just starts, and what happens...so my mom started watching and she actually eventually understood.” (Respondent 3)

DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH

This study intends to look at the interaction of identity and media for homosexual individuals in India given its unique context of criminality associated with homosexuality until recently. Preliminary analyses reveal conformations but also departures from prevailing models of homosexual identity development. We intend to explore these departures given the unique context of the study in order to enhance our understanding of the process of homosexual identity formation. We expect effects of the paradoxical nature of information disseminated by media and the Internet; while the media depicts comical stereotypes and negative portrayals subtly aligning with the traditional orthodox Indian societal norms, the Internet allows homosexuals to connect globally, anonymously and obscurely away from the judgement of the larger society. These are some of the angles we intend to explore in the study.

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