

Safe Spaces and Unsafe Designs: A Mixed-Methods Study of Queer User Experiences on Grindr in India

The Supreme Court of India decriminalized same sex relations in 2018 through the partial abrogation of Article 377. However, the marginalization of queer communities in India persists, via stigma, inequalities, and unsafe social conditions. This reality makes digital intimacy crucial for understanding queer experiences, as online platforms often serve as the only accessible safe spaces for connection and visibility.

Research in the growing field of “Grindr studies” has extensively documented these digital dynamics. Early work—largely focused on the Global North—conceptualizing the platform as a “hook-up” space (Wortham, 2013) and “meat market” (Bonner-Thompson, 2017, p.1), often emphasizing public health and self-presentation. More recent studies from the Global South have shifted attention to the dangers of using the app in restrictive environments. Research from the global south shows how users face serious risks—from physical violence to “predators, scammers, fakers” and develop strategies of “doing trust” to handle the intense need for connection that comes from isolation (Afzal, 2025). However, despite the detailed documentation of social risks, there is a lack of work connecting these vulnerabilities directly to the design of the application themselves.

Situated in this conundrum, we investigate the experiences of queer individuals on Grindr, and what shapes these experiences. We employ a mixed-methods approach applied to a text corpus of over 350 posts from a prominent Indian LGBTQ+ subreddit, where users anonymously share personal experiences. Reddit is particularly suited for this analysis as its anonymity enables more candid and community-driven accounts of experiences. Methodologically, we first utilized a fine-tuned DistilRoBERTa-base (Sanh et al., 2019) classifier to categorize (Ekman et al., 1992) these narratives into six primary emotional states: anger, sadness, fear, joy, surprise, and disgust. We subsequently conducted a manual discourse analysis on the posts within each emotional cluster. This qualitative examination allowed us to deconstruct recurring narratives and group them into seven overarching themes. For instance, the theme of 'Societal and Cultural Context' encompasses sub-themes such as caste-based hierarchies, the rural-urban divide, and familial pressure, illustrating how the platform reproduces offline social stratifications rather than functioning as a neutral space.

This analysis reveals that negative emotions are primarily shaped by toxic masculinity, self-image insecurities, and difficulties in forming meaningful connections. By categorizing these user narratives into themes, we were able to map these emotional outcomes directly to the platform's design features. A critical example of this is the intersection between Relationship Dynamics and the app's Marketplace Interface. Our findings suggest that the infinite grid layout

commodifies users, presenting them as products to be 'shopped for' rather than individuals to be discovered and inevitably compared against a wall of alternatives. This visual-centric design encourages side-by-side evaluation, necessitating snap judgments based on a singular image.

We argue that the very platforms where users seek freedom and visibility become sites of vulnerability due to their universal design affordances. Thus, we contend that there is an urgent need to create platforms with design ideations that are embedded in local cultural specificities. To help define these nuances, our future work will expand the scope of inquiry by conducting qualitative interviews with a cohort of queer users in India, thereby contextualizing our design critique within the realities of the global south.

References

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