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## **Abstract**

India has emerged as one of the top users of the Internet. However, the question is how the rise of the Internet influences a society like India, which is still struggling with issues like poverty, literacy, employment, religion, and gender. This research endeavors to explore one aspect of that question by studying the role of the social media platform – Facebook Groups, for the LGBTQ community in India against the backdrop of the societal taboos and lack of legal support for the queer community, coupled with the existing infrastructural loopholes like education and technology. Over the past couple of decades, India has been witnessing a wave of change as conversations surrounding non-normative gender and sexuality is on the rise. Following from the social identity theory, social identity model of de-individuation effects (SIDE), and the theory of counterpublics, this sequential mixed methods research analyzes and presents an understanding of the relationship that exists between social media, identity, LGBTQ community, and the Indian social context. It is hoped that it will add to the conversation surrounding social media and identity, particularly queer identity, and enable an understanding into how social media can be used for identity construction for a minority population like the queer community, in a socio-cultural context like India.

**Queering Virtual Groups: Exploring Facebook Groups as a space  
for identity construction and social justice among the  
LGBTQ community in India**

by

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Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Mass Communications

Syracuse University

June 2019

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## **Chapter 1: LGBTQ Facebook Groups in India and Identity Construction**

India's strongly heteronormative societal structure provides minimal scope for the Indian LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, and queer or questioning) community to gain social acceptance. The longstanding law, known as the Indian Penal Code Section 377, which was codified during the British rule in 1860 as a measure against non-procreative sexual practices further compounded the problem (Bhaskaran, 2002). The law deemed homosexuality and by means of association all that is non-normative in terms of gender and sexuality, as illegal and unnatural. In 2018, the Supreme Court of India finally read down Section 377, thereby giving back the fundamental freedom of sexuality to the people. Nevertheless, Indian society remains apprehensive to the possibilities and life that non-normative gender and sexual identities bring to the fore: India was ranked among the 12 most homophobic nations in the world back in 2014 by *Newsweek* (Strasser, 2014). Until 2018, the Indian LGBTQ community faced opposition from both the society and the law. Identifying outside normative gender and sexual identities often bore (and continue to bear) social repercussions in the form of ridicule, ostracization, violence, and in some cases forced confirmation to social norms through heterosexual marriages. Even though legally the Indian queer community is free today and many members are coming out about their identity (BBC India, 2018), LGBTQ individuals who continue to live in rural or semi-urban areas believe they have quite a long way to go in terms of bringing about social awareness and acceptance (Pandey, 2018).

In the past, the law proved to be a significant barrier in identifying and networking with and within the LGBTQ community. One of the earliest ways of going beyond the interpersonal networks, to connect with the LGBTQ community, was through India's first gay magazine, *Bombay Dost*. First published in 1990, in the form of newsletters, the publication was more

expensive than the regular lifestyle magazines at the time. However, the newsletters offered an exclusive classifieds section for readers to advertise in, and there on communicate with each other through written mail sent to post office boxes in the city of Mumbai (Phukan, 2015). It also led to the identification of LGBTQ support organizations across the country, and the feedback mail received by such organizations often consisted of requests made by LGBTQ identifying people for networking information with other members of the community (Dave, 2012). With the advent of the Internet in the country in 1995, members with access to the World Wide Web started using it to unlock the doors of communication and networking – connecting across the virtual world and transcending geopolitical boundaries and social distances. The use of email lists, message boards, and weblogs became a widespread practice among the LGBTQ Indians (Krishna, 2010; Mitra & Gajjala, 2008; Mitra, 2010).

Following along the lines of Internet-based communication, Facebook Groups have emerged as a space, which under ‘closed’ or ‘secret’ settings allow the members who identify as LGBTQ, supporters and allies, to come together. These online spaces, which can be imagined as a closed door, private, intimate, and in group meetings, provide the LGBTQ members with a place to share information about gender and sexual identities. Conversations flow in the form of posts, comments, likes, and shares. With the addition of Facebook Reactions in February 2016, the users further engaged with a post by sharing a reaction appropriate to their feelings, imitating the possible physical response into their virtual performance of the self. The self as portrayed on this virtual network of Facebook reflects an identity that the individuals believe to be not only social but also personal. In the sense of how George Herbert Mead argued, that it is only through communication that the self is established (Ellis, 2010; Mead, 1925), such social interaction and identity impacts the personal identity construction.

The purpose of this sequential mixed methods research is an in-depth exploration of a sample of Facebook Groups used by the LGBTQ community, to develop an understanding of the role of this web-based social networking platform and virtual communities in the identity construction for the queer community in India. Social identity as defined by Tajfel (1982) is that part of the self-concept or identity which is defined by memberships to certain groups, and adopting the characteristics associated with those identities. It plays a key role in how individuals conform to group norms following group identification (Tajfel, 1982). Social identity and group norms have been identified as two of the major ways that social influence functions in virtual group settings (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). Research has also identified the antecedents to groups norms that influence individual's need to be a part of a group like self-discovery, social enhancement, and maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004).

The Facebook Groups observably seem to have become a virtual support system for those still closeted or questioning their identity, as well as for building relationships, and providing a platform to announce events and physical gatherings. However, most importantly, studies suggest that the anonymity on most social networking platforms, where one can choose to be who they want to be, has led many of the Internet users to assume their preferred or chosen identity (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Christopherson, 2007; Peterson, 1997). Discussed in further details in Chapter 2, anonymity essentially provides a sense of privacy and control, which is otherwise not possible in physical face-to-face settings. Following from these arguments, it was essential to explore how anonymity and privacy on Facebook Groups play a role in the identity construction of LGBTQ individuals who have sought membership in such communities.

Historical texts and studies show that sexual freedom has been a part of the Indian culture from well before the colonial era, and it also suggests that such identities were never categorized or framed in concrete terms in India (Chatterjee, 2002; Gupta, 2005; Reddy, 2005). The use of Indian terms, coined or identified, as denoting the members of the LGBTQ community are instead seen as characteristically working or lower middle class (Gupta, 2005), therefore bringing in a socio-economic element to the use of language within the community. Local terminologies used for various alternate gender and sexual identities, seldom come up in the public discourse, like media and everyday language, but instead are limited to the academia and macro-level usage in particular parts of the country (Gupta, 2005). Indigenous terms like *kothi* or *koti* and *panthi*, describes two male partners in an MSM relation; *sakhi*, refers to women who have sex with women; *hijra*, refers to transgender and transsexual individuals in India, and have been identified as an official third gender or sex; *chakka*, used to refer to hijras, but in a more derogatory sense (Dasgupta, 2011). Given their non-existence in the everyday communication of the average Indian, it has led to the point where the Indian society has come to view any form of alternate gender and sexual identity, as largely external, western and upper-class concepts (ABVA, 1991; Puri, 1999).

Further, the use of Euro-American terminologies in mainstream English language media, like lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual individuals, or the acronyms of LGBTQ, LGBT, GLBTQ, or the umbrella term “queer,” has added to externalizing these identities (Shahani, 2008). It should be noted here that media mentions about non-normative gender and sexuality were scarce, and mostly scandalous, till about the 1990s when queer publications began (Dave, 2012; Shahani, 2008). Since that period, the non-binary identities became visible to the society, but were expressed using the Euro-American terminologies, as opposed to the local terms. So as

Shahani (2008) notes in his multi-sited ethnography, that even while debates rage about increasing the use of local terminologies (for queer identity) to better the cultural identification with the Indian LGBTQ community, the western terms have a greater “currency” in terms of identification due to their prolong usage in the public discourse. This above explication about the conceptualization of alternate identities is relevant to this study, as it can be assumed that the majority of the Facebook Groups users belong to an English speaking, middle or upper middle-class population, who have access to the Internet and are technologically literate. Therefore, the information or knowledge shared about alternate identities on such Facebook Groups are highly dependent on the use of Euro-American terminologies and understandings of gender and sexuality. During the study, it was interesting to explore participants’ choice of terminologies to define their identity and compare the use of English language terms with the more localized terms. It is possible that many among the LGBTQ community, particularly in urban areas, are unaware of most Indian terms used to define queer identities.

When writing this dissertation, the researcher had to take into account the linguistic differences when it comes to understanding and conceptualizing the LGBTQ community in India. To that end, the use of LGBTQ or queer as an umbrella term when referring to the community in this research was a technical decision based on its prevalent usage in academic literature, use by support organizations such as GLAAD, and to strike a balance in terms of inclusiveness as the Q in LGBTQ also refers to queer and questioning, thereby encompassing gender and sexual identities that may not have any terms yet. Recently, the *Associated Press Stylebook* also updated their LGBT entry and lists LGBTQ as acceptable in all references (2017).

This research investigated how virtual groups, on popular social networking platforms, can affect identity construction of members of a minority community like the LGBTQ, in a

social context like that of India. This study provides an insight into the potential of social media platforms to be a space which can account for building identity and thereon seek social justice. By means of cyberethnography and anonymous web-based surveys, the study explored if perception of anonymity and privacy in online groups affect participation, identity performances, and group identity. Emphasis was also laid upon the perception of social intolerance in India and how that affected participation and identity. Finally, the study investigated the uses of Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ community in terms of knowledge sharing, networking, and support.

### **Context**

“Homosexuality – Not an Aberration but a Variation of Sexuality” (p.15) wrote Justice Indu Malhotra in the Supreme Court of India Judgement, dated September 6, 2018, for the case of reading down Section 377 (N.S. Johar v. Union of India, 2018). The battle for the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer or Questioning) community in India to have a legal standing in its own country finally came to an end after 28 years. The movement was started in 1991 by AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (AIDS Anti-Discrimination Movement), an organization fighting discrimination against AIDS survivors, by means of publishing the historical report “Less than Gay – A citizen’s report on the status of homosexuality in India.” Over the past three decades the movement has undergone a roller-coaster ride. One of the key aspects highlighted in the 1991 report was the lack of recognition about the existence of homosexuality in the country, which was also reflected in the continuance of the colonial era law of Section 377 (ABVA, 1991).

Legally, under the Indian Penal Code of Section 377 (1860), any person who engaged in sexual acts “against the order of nature,” could have been incarcerated. The law technically did not make homosexuality illegal but criminalized the practice of sexual acts that were non-

heterosexual, and therefore caused major concerns for the LGBTQ community in India. In 2009, the provision within Section 377, which criminalized sexual acts between consenting adults was read down, citing it as a violation of Constitutional rights (Kumar, 2009). However, the law was again fully reinstated in 2013 by the Supreme Court of India, and between 2013 and 2018 determined much of the debate and discussion surrounding the LGBTQ movement (Oprah Winfrey Network, 2015; Phadke, 2015). In 2018, the law was again read down in recognition of how it violated the constitutional right to equality in India (Article 14) and discriminated against same-sex adults engaging in a consensual sexual relationship. It was considered unconstitutional to penalize consensual sexual relationship among adults, irrespective of their sexual orientation and identity (N.S. Johar v. Union of India, 2018, p. 165). Quoting real-life accounts shared with the court during the proceedings, Justice Dhananjaya Y. Chandrachud recognized the implications of Section 377 on various aspects of life for the LGBTQ community, including health. He wrote:

Nevertheless, these individuals are united by one factor - that their exclusion, discrimination and marginalization is rooted in societal heteronormativity and society's pervasive bias towards gender binary and opposite-gender relationships, which marginalizes and excludes all non-heteronormative sexual and gender identities. This, in turn, has important implications for individuals' health-seeking behaviour, how health services are provided, and the extent to which sexual health can be achieved. (pp.93, Part G).

In modern day India, the social norms guiding sexual behaviors are believed to be stricter than their past counterparts. Following the advent of the colonial rule and religious attachments to sex and sexuality, the Indian society evolved into a heteronormative social structure, with laws

such as Section 377 that idealized the procreative form of sexual relationship for the Indian society. Section 377 today continues as a law to criminalize non-consensual sexual acts between adults, any sexual behavior between adults and minors or animals.

The early sexually liberal culture of India, as evidenced in the pre-colonial texts like Vatsayayana's *Kamasutra* and Kalyanamalla's *Ananga Ranga* are of historical importance to the country and a matter of pride. However, per Srivastava (2004), these ancient texts' prescriptions are lost on the public, which in turn speaks for Indian public's narrow-sighted approach and attitude towards the subject of gender and sexuality. Part of this attitude can be traced back to the orientalist selectivity of texts during the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century colonial era when male subjectivities were reinforced, and women and femininity were marginalized (Bachetta, 1999). This led to ignoring the above-mentioned texts and scriptures, temples and folktales, but instead reified texts like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, which portrays specific gender-roles for each character and provides limited scope for gender fluidity and sexual flexibility.

Reproduction further plays a significant role in the understanding of sexuality and sexual roles in contemporary India. A man's role has often been considered as wasted if not used to reproduce, while a woman is stripped of all sexual desires, and the desexualized female body is simply considered to be a mechanism for procreation, and thereby portray the 'ideal' Indian woman (Srivastava, 2004). In this regard, it is also important to understand how procreation in Indian society defines a man and woman's status. Even in the 21st century, an Indian man or woman, who has been unable to produce a child, is looked down upon. Following from the social constructivist approach to gender roles, the reproductive roles delegated within the gender binary is directly linked to the person's social status and respect. This holds particularly true for biological females in India (Puri, Sex, sexuality and the nation-state, 1999; Srivastava, 2004).

Beyond the gender binary, India has also had a rich history acknowledging the existence of transgender individuals or hijras, who in 2014 were officially given the right to be legally recognized as the third gender or third sex on official documents such as passports and voter identity cards. Gayatri Reddy's (2005) ethnographic work on the Indian hijras of the South Indian twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad throws significant light upon the perils of a transgender community, who are both deified and stigmatized due to their gender ambiguity (Reddy, 2005). Reddy intertwines her own experience with the Hijras and highlights how the hijra community's status evolved over time, from being called upon for their blessings for newly-weds or new born children, and at other times forgotten and forced to take up prostitution. While the term hijra translates to eunuch or hermaphrodite in the English language, the Indian understanding of this community is rather convoluted and not only includes individuals who identify as intersex, hermaphrodites, and transgender, but also cross-dressers (Reddy, 2005). Today, the hijra community is largely understood as comprising of transgender individuals, and they continue to fight against social discrimination and apathy as found during the recent 2019 Indian general elections where majority of the transgender voters did not go to polling booths for fear of adverse repercussions to their gender identity (Banerji, 2019).

What further complicates matters for the Indian understanding of gender and sexuality is the heavy draw upon traditions and culture as a defense against non-heteronormative sexuality. The non-Hindu and tribal populations are often sexually stereotyped and tagged as deviant cultures. Deviance here implies sexual practices that are against the sexual norms of the mainstream society, in this case the practice of monogamy and heterosexual relationships. The dominant culture has also tried enacting laws to 'control' such behavior (Srivastava, 2004). The colonial era law of Section 377 only strengthened the conversation surrounding the non-natural

status of the LGBTQ community and therefore impacted the movement surrounding queer activism over the past two decades since the first Indian gay protest on August 11, 1992 (Bhaskaran, 2002; Dave, 2012).

Going over the timeline of how the understanding of gender and sexuality in India has evolved, they (gender and sexuality) increasingly appear to have been tools to wield power, whether it be political, personal or social. For instance, the power of penetration and the status associated with the person on top versus the one at the bottom, or the integral aspect of a patriarchal society's need to enforce the power of procreation. With the focus increasingly developing on the queer culture in India, it has also been observed that there are marked amount of differences within the queer community itself, which cannot be simplified into two or three groups. Rather there are multiple groups defined not just by gender and sexual identity but also by class, educational background, English-speaking background, gender-role within relations, and roles within the community (Boyce, 2006; Dave, 2012; Dasgupta, 2013; Gupta, 2005).

**Social Media Development in India.** Cited among the top three countries with the highest number of Internet users over the past years (CIA, 2016; Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2019; World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), 2016), and ranked as the country with the highest number of Facebook users as of January 2019 (Statista, 2019), India's social media market has been booming. Cost-effective and easy maintenance of mobile communication and Internet has added to the spread of the social networking site, Facebook, across the country (Campbell & Ling, 2009; CXOtoday, 2015).

The commercialization of the Internet started in the late 1980s, and it was fully commercialized in the US by 1995 (Leiner, Cerf, Clark, Kahn, Kleinrock, Lynch, Postel, Roberts, & Wolff, 1997). India was one of the early adopters of the Internet communication form

with its first project – the Education Research Network (ERNET), that came up in 1986 (CCDS Team, 2013). However, the Internet in India did not go public until 1995, when Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited (VSNL) formally launched it as a commercial communication form (CCDS Team, 2013; Moray, 2015). Over the past two decades India has become one of the countries with the highest number of Internet users in the world: according to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) the country had a total of 445.96 million Internet subscribers in 2017 (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, 2018). But what are the implication of these numbers for the common people of the country?

One of the major implications can be argued to be the use of social networking platforms for communication across the country and globally, and an increasing role of platforms like Facebook and Twitter in bringing together people with common interests. Case in point, the 2012 Delhi Rape Case in India. The story of the Delhi rape victim, more popularly known as Nirbhaya, Damini or *India's Daughter* following the BBC documentary (2015), raised a storm in favor of social justice and demanded changes in the legal system. The gruesome details of the crime had shaken the faith of the citizens in the country's administrative bodies to protect its people, particularly the women. The fact that such a crime could be committed made Internet users in the country, as well as outside, take to social media platforms voicing their concerns. It led to organizing physical social movements asking for judicial reforms to the laws pertaining to violence against women (Girling, 2013; Prasad & Nandakumar, 2012). The rape case, and the massive protests that followed, forced the government to initiate a process of reviewing and reforming legal measures to be taken in cases of violence against women. The role of social media in organizing the protest movements in the country was noticeable (Barn, 2013). This ties back into the goal of this research, which is to explore how social media and popular platforms

like Facebook, may lead to increased communication and identity formation for a marginalized section like the LGBTQ community, in India, and eventually aid in the struggle for social justice and human rights.

### ***Why Facebook?***

In India, the lack of Internet access in every corner of the country can be considered a significant disadvantage for this study. Yet the fact that the country boasts a 74 percent literacy rate, just 10 percent shy of the world average, and is one of the top users of Internet and Facebook, also strengthens the arguments put forward in this study. The popularity of Facebook has pushed it up to a level where 300 million people or approximately 22% of the total Indian population use the platform (Statista, 2019), and thereby suggest a significant number of people who have at least the basic knowledge about the social networking site. The cost-effective mobile communication technology has a substantial contribution in this regard. In fact, in the event of a new smart phone purchased over the counter in India one of the first apps installed by the store manager, to initiate the customers into using the smartphone and mobile Internet, is Facebook<sup>1</sup>.

In 2014, Facebook proposed to provide Internet connectivity in various parts of India through Internet.org and Free Basics (Deutsche Welle, 2015; Gopalakrishnan, 2015; Guynn, 2016; IBNLive, 2015; Reuters, 2015). However, faced with severe criticism and considered as a threat to net neutrality, since Internet.org would have limited access to only Facebook collaborative websites, the Indian regulatory bodies stopped the progress of the project in 2016 (Boom, 2016). The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) passed the ruling on

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from personal experience

February 8, 2016, forbidding Internet providers to install zero-rate plans or access to limited websites in lieu of free Internet services (BBC, 2016). Considering the popularity of the platform, it was a shocking and unexpected development against Facebook. It was partly fueled by the growing protest against Free Basics and Internet.org which led to the organization of movements and online campaigns like “Save The Internet” (Boom, 2016; Goel & Isaac, 2016; Solon, 2017). Media reports suggested that Facebook may make a comeback to the Indian market with a new project catering to the Internet consumers (Boom, 2016; Goel & Isaac, 2016). In the meantime, the effects of 2016 US elections and the debacle of fake news and breach of user data on Facebook, reached India as well. According to Facebook, Cambridge Analytica had reportedly acquired the data of a total of 335 people in India, and through that network breached the information of over half a million users in the country (The Times of India, 2018). In India, however, the biggest problem lay with WhatsApp, the Facebook owned popular instant messaging service. Fake news and misinformation spread through WhatsApp messages and led to over a dozen lynchings in the country (Iyengar, 2018). Nevertheless, the Internet users in India continue to use both WhatsApp and Facebook, albeit while coming to terms with trust issues.

Meanwhile, the government and the industry both have been working towards not just better telecommunication in the country, but also providing Internet to the people. One of the examples is that of BSNL, the nationalized telecommunication giant, which delivered free Wi-Fi connectivity to all pilgrims who attended the Ardh Kumbh Mela in Haridwar, Uttarakhand, for the four months of the festival (PTI, 2016). Furthermore, the Government of India launched the Bharat Broadband Network Limited or the BharatNet project in 2012, which is aimed at connecting rural areas across the country to the world wide web. The project is supposed to provide high speed broadband connection through BharatNet to the 250,000 Gram Panchayats in

the country, and thereby “improving the lives of people by providing affordable and equitable access to information and knowledge” by 2019 (BBNL, 2019).

Due to the rise in the Internet usage in the country it was pertinent to first understand how the LGBTQ community in India were accessing the Internet and thereby the Facebook Groups. Given the increased amount of mobile Internet usage in the country, it was hypothesized in this research that mobile communication has had an impact on participation in the Facebook Groups. The following hypothesis was explored using the survey data.

**H1:** Participants with access to the Internet over mobile devices will show more active participation than participants with non-mobile devices.

While Facebook Groups initially were set up for the purposes of bringing together like-minded people to have a private discussion forum, exploration of how the Groups affect identity construction for marginalized communities is a significant contribution to existing literature. This research has explored the factors like anonymity and privacy, and their effects on identity formation, against the backdrop of a social context like India. Exploring the relationship between the variables of gender and sexuality, social media (anonymity and privacy), identity, within the Indian social context, this study is a novel contribution towards communication research. It adds to the ongoing studies in the areas of social media, identity, gender and sexuality, and South Asian research.

Efforts have been made to ensure that individual participants (interviews) and, participating groups and their members have access to the findings of this research. LGBTQ support groups across India have been made aware of this study and ways to access it, as this research can lead to a better understanding of how virtual communities, and easily accessible

spaces such as Facebook Groups, can be a platform for advocacy and support, can possibly transcend geographical boundaries and bring the members closer as a unit. The major advantage with social media lies in its ease of accessibility across time and space for everyone with Internet access. Such platforms, as found in this research, can lead to more organized and coordinated activities and events, drawing in participation from various corners of the country.

In the following pages, the main constructs of this research have been broken down into chapters, allowing for an in-depth exploration of past studies conducted in this area. The second chapter dissects social media, and the how it affects self-presentation. It also breaks down Facebook and focuses upon past research, particularly with reference to self-presentation, identity, and anonymity. The third chapter explores the concept of identity, and thereon the social identity theory, leading into social media and identity, and how anonymity of social media gave rise to the SIDE model. The fourth chapter takes the conversation further into identity and being queer, particularly in India, and how social media can affect queer community. It also expounds upon the theory of counterpublics. In the fifth chapter, the research methodology for this sequential mixed methods research has been outlined in detail. Both the sixth and seventh chapters summarize the research results. While the sixth chapter discusses the key findings from the cyberethnography and in-depth interviews conducted with LGBTQ identifying individuals, the seventh chapter focuses upon the results of the anonymous web-based survey developed following the qualitative inquiry, and details testing of the hypotheses and exploration of various research questions raised in the study. The final chapter of this dissertation provides a discussion of the research findings, its implications, thoughts for future studies, and conclusion.

## **Chapter 2: Communication in the Social Media Environment**

Social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook have garnered a fair amount of research interest due to their characteristics like accessibility, ability to connect across time and space, asynchronicity and the anonymity of the SNS which lends a touch of intimacy and privacy that might be lacking in physical face-to-face communication (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Ren, et al., 2012; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Drawing upon Erving Goffman's (1959) theory about the "Presentation of Self" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), it has been argued that Internet users are constantly under pressure to put up an image that is particularly socially desirable (Aspling, 2011) or in line with their individual self-concept and group identity (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). This study explored these very characteristics of social networking sites, but with focus on the feature of Facebook Groups. It researches how the various proven social media characteristics aid identity construction for LGBTQ individuals, particularly in limited settings like lack of access to technology, legal, and social support. Therefore, this chapter considers past research on the communication environment on social networking sites and social media, with focus on Facebook, and highlights the factors of self-presentation, need for social media communication, privacy and anonymity, online communities and the impacts of such web-based relations.

### **What is Social Media?**

Social media can be defined as the collection of websites and Internet based applications that allow people to communicate, collaborate and network with each other for various purposes (Fuchs, 2014; Jensen, 2015; What is social media?, 2016). The advent of Web 2.0 at the turn of the 21st century led to a more social and interactive web, starting with web logs, microblogs,

social networking sites and media-sharing platforms, all of which drew upon user-generated information (Fuchs, 2014; What is social media?, 2016). It also marked the convergence in terms of the media-industries, and terms like participatory media and “the people formerly known as the audience,” in Jay Rosen’s (2006) words, came to define the social media users (Fuchs, 2014).

Christian Fuchs however questions the very use of the term “social” in social media in his book *Social media: A critical introduction* (2014). Bringing together various definitions, he highlights the stress on “sociality” and explores the concept through social theory as explicated in the discipline of sociology. In conclusion, he suggests that media today are nothing but “techno-social systems” where in the technological structures or networks “interact with social relations and human activities in complex ways. Power structures shape the media and the social relations of the media” (2014). The concept of techno-social system feeds into this research as it seeks to explore the possibilities that a technological or computer network holds for human relations.

Jensen, on the other hand, approaches the same question as Fuchs, but concludes with two broad approaches to understanding social media – one where social media is a “vehicle of civil society, manifesting a third force in society,” allowing non-mainstream interests to be voiced and heard. In this approach, it is a part of the public sphere. The other approach is where social media can be thought of as *the* public sphere that aids in forming or reforming the civil society, just as legacy media forms and coffee-house conversations did (Jensen, 2015).

Following along the lines of social media explained as a concept and a system, this research considers how the techno-social structure contributes towards the social media being an open space for public debate and opinion formation. Using German sociologist and philosopher Jurgen Habermas’s conceptualization of public sphere as the guiding principle towards that

understanding (Habermas, 1991a; Habermas, 1991b), this study considers social media as a space to discuss and debate concerns regarding authority and power, may it be in the form of state or society. Taking into consideration the feminist criticism of the Habermasian public sphere, this research stresses upon the need for a more inclusive public sphere in order to eliminate the systemic inequalities. As Nancy Fraser (1992) posited that multiple public(s) or counterpublic(s) is a required element to achieve equal participation and infinitely better than one over-arching public.

What is pertinent to this study is the social networking sites or the web-based applications that are exclusively providing a space to form relations through interaction and communication – personal, professional or just interest-based – and are a part of the larger concept of social media, for example, Facebook, Instagram, Google Plus, LinkedIn, and Twitter. boyd and Ellison (2008) differentiate between social networking sites and “social network sites,” highlighting the factor that while most of the sites allow for the activity of networking or creating new relationships, the primary goal is to create a network among various people. The people may very well have an existing relationship among themselves, and no new connections are made through the social networking sites. In the light of which it is just a simple network of people.

We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site. (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211)

Considering the term “networking” bears a lot of weight in this research as it focuses on the aspect of LGBTQ population in India initiating new relationships through Facebook Groups,

this study has referred to web applications like Facebook as social networking sites. As defined by boyd and Ellison (2008), Facebook allows for the creation of a user profile within the system, a friend list and the ability to navigate through the Facebook universe or Face-verse to the profiles of various other Facebook users, who may or may not be a part of common connections. Facebook is considerably more than just a social networking site – it is a social media marketing platform and one of the biggest commodities being exchanged for the site’s economic benefit is the user data. Fuchs (2014), when discussing Facebook’s methods of accessing and exploiting user data, also suggests alternatives in the form of non-commercial and non-profit Internet based platforms such as Diaspora. This alternative platform is open sourced and exists on independently-run servers or pods, located all over the world, thereby allowing for a decentralized system. However, alternatives like Diaspora or MeWe are yet to attain the same kind of popularity as that achieved by Facebook or Google.

## **Facebook**

Since its conception as a social networking site meant for students in 2004, Facebook has grown to become one of the major players on the US Internet market alongside Microsoft, Google, Apple and Amazon (Campbell, Martin, & Fabos, 2016). According to Alexa’s monthly rankings of websites based on the Internet traffic in the month of March (2019), Facebook was the third most popular web address on the Internet globally, as well as in the US. In India, Facebook fell behind to the fifth rank, while Google and its sites occupied the first four spots (Alexa, 2019).

Facebook has undergone several changes and modifications over the past decade and more, right from being called “The Facebook” to just Facebook in 2005; from being limited to high school and college students in the US to a diverse global network of people (Tramz, 2014).

According to Facebook Reports on their fourth quarterly earnings results for 2018, the platform had 2.32 billion users (as of December 31, 2018), with 1.52 billion people active every day, increasing at the rate of 9% every year (Facebook, Inc., 2019). In 2017, Facebook brought its quarterly earnings to a close with a 14% annual growth in its user base (Facebook, Inc., 2018). While the growth may have slowed down, the platform still remains a popular site globally.

The popularity of Facebook has also led to much research on the platform and its impacts over the past decade. Topics include self-presentation on Facebook (Gil-Or, Levi-Belz, & Turel, 2015; Toma & Carlson, 2015) and personality traits (Lee, Ahn, & Kim, 2014), gender differences in self-presentation (Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2014), third person-effect and framing (Schweisberger, Billinson, & Chock, 2014), and research on Facebook Groups (Cassaniti, Mwaikambo, & Shore, 2014; Pi, Chou, & Liao, 2013; Oliver, Washington, Wittenbridge-Lyles, Gage, Mooney, and Demiris, 2015).

**Facebook and Self-presentation.** The platform of Facebook gives the opportunity to set up a user account and a “profile” which exhibits the information that an individual chooses to share with other users (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Joinson, 2008; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Facebook and other social networking sites have been a major area of research, particularly from the perspective of self-presentational behavior (boyd, 2009; Joinson, 2008; Lee, Ahn, & Kim, 2014; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Ong, Ang, Ho, Lim, Goh, & Lee, 2011; Toma & Carlson, 2015). The Internet creates the need for the users to exhibit one’s self to the audience nested on the World Wide Web, in a socially desirable manner (Toma & Carlson, 2015) and share information about the self, like photographs of sporting the latest trends in clothes and marking oneself as adhering to the expected normative behavior (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Lee, Ahn, & Kim, 2014; Ong, et al., 2011; Zhao, Grasmuck,

& Martin, 2008). The social networking platform becomes the stage as conceptualized by Goffman, where the users put up a performance which is not necessarily their true selves (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Per Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social networking sites like Facebook scored high in terms of self-presentation or self-disclosure, along with blogs and virtual social worlds like Second Life. Hence, the social networking space is being used as a platform to perform one's identity; leading to the question integral to this research as to how this identity is constructed and what role social networking plays, if any. The third chapter delves deeper into the concept of identity, and how individual and social identity is built using social media.

Goffman's (1963) conceptualization of individuals "performance" of themselves in a social interaction is relevant in the social networking sphere, which is a form of social interaction where arguably the individual considers the social media space as a theatrical stage (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). The idea is not to perform an entirely different identity than the offline self, but as Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) found in their research, that the participants do engage in *editing* certain facets of their self in their online profiles by enhancing some characteristics and minimizing others. Their research also suggests that this close similarity between the online and offline self is more prevalent in social media sites where the users are not seeking anonymity; in the event of anonymous interactions, for example in Second Life, the users are more likely to deviate from their offline persona. The researchers concluded that in some of the studied cases, it also appeared that the online personality was reported by the participants as their "true selves," as opposed to the offline persona governed by familial or societal pressures (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). Therefore, it can be hypothesized that the perception of anonymity has a significant impact on

the creation of an alternate identity to be used on the online platforms, leading to the following hypothesis.

**H2.** LGBTQ members of Facebook Groups with an alternate profile will exhibit a higher level of perceived anonymity than members who do not have an alternate profile.

Applying Goffman's idea of identity performance in social interactions, Miller and Arnold (2009) term offline interactions as backstage preparations for the performance in the online environment. Following from Goffman's ideation, both the online and offline identity are reflective of the same individual's identity, and each inform the other (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). What has been consistently observed across studies into self-presentation and identity performances in the offline world, is the fact that the social media sites accommodation of anonymity impacts how users often edit their virtual identity or identities to be someone similar or completely different than their non-virtual or offline identity (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). Zhao, Grasmuck and Jason (2008) suggest that it is no different than how strangers interacting in a public environment like a restaurant or bar may choose to hide certain facts about their lives and identity; but they cannot edit their physical characteristics. That limitation is not present in online interactions, and therefore enables users to adopt any physical characteristic, particularly those which are socially desirable in the given setting (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Welles, 2007; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Finally, the anonymous and disembodied nature of online interactions gives users the space to construct a new identity, may it be in terms of gender, race, class, ethnicity, age, profession, etc. A man can portray himself as a woman, a Brown woman can consider a White avatar, a 50-year-old female accountant can choose to be a 25-year-old aspiring model, a shy introvert person can be an extrovert in the virtual world, and so on (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Welles, 2007; Zhao,

Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Therefore it can further be argued that the perception of anonymity provides individuals the comfort to perform their chosen gender and or sexual identity:

**H3:** Perceived anonymity on Facebook Groups gives the LGBTQ individual members a space to perform the gender and/or sexual identity they best identify with.

The following section further explores the aspect of anonymity and privacy on social networking sites such as Facebook.

**Facebook and Anonymity.** A synonym for anonymity is unidentifiable, or not showing any characteristic that could help establish the identity of the person (Merriam-Webster, 2017). According to Christopherson (2007), “Anonymity has traditionally been conceived as the inability of others to identify an individual or for others to identify one’s self.” An attribute that has attracted many people to various social media platforms, as it allows for the option of concealing one’s offline identity or just “partly masking” it on the virtual world – an identity that cannot be linked back (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Christopherson, 2007). This characteristic is particularly useful for people like political bloggers (Rigby, 2007), or sex bloggers, for whom an identity revelation could lead to potential backlash from the authority or society (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). In other words, anonymity provides a sense of privacy or control over other people’s access to a user’s identity (Christopherson, 2007; Peterson, 1997).

Facebook as a social networking platform encourages sharing individual identity markers like name, gender, age, profession, location, photographs, interests and more, thereby making it difficult to link anonymity with the platform (Tsukayama, 2014). However, in the above mentioned sense of anonymity, it also provides users with the possibility of creating an entirely

new identity and thereby keeping details that would not be linked back to the user. This characteristic about Facebook, and other social networking platforms, is particularly desirable for individuals who may choose to keep their offline and online selves separate, or hold multiple virtual identities. As expressed earlier, each of the identity expressions can be reflective of the same person, even if the expressions are vastly different from each other (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013).

In order to create a Facebook profile, an active email id is almost the only requirement. Once the profile is created, the name and other identifying details can be changed, and the privacy settings allow control over what profile information others can access. The user also has to ensure that the profile never gets flagged for activities which might be considered offensive or illegal, and thereby potentially harm that identity. But following these guidelines, an alternate identity can be created for anonymous usage (Laporte, 2013; Rutherford, 2014). Arguably, if a user has multiple email ids under multiple names or identities, they can create that many number of profiles on various social networking sites, including Facebook. Nonetheless, Facebook's "Name Policy" is strictly against impersonation or the use of any other identity (name) than one by which a person is known to their peers in everyday life ("What names are allowed on Facebook?," 2019). Interestingly, most communication on social networking sites before Facebook did not stress the need for the user's offline identity or name, but rather there was a prevalence of usernames that may or may not resemble the official name (Bort, 2014). Mark Zuckerberg has previously gone on record to state that the practice of maintaining multiple identities for just one person was an "example of a lack of integrity" (Edwards, 2014; Helft, 2011). However, with the recent spurt in applications that allow for anonymous interactions such as Whisper and Psst! Anonymous, Facebook relaxed its guard against anonymity and launched

the application called “Rooms” in 2014 (Isaac, 2014; Linshi, 2014). The app that allowed creation of shared interest based forums for anonymous interactions, completely outside of Facebook, failed to take off (Health, 2015).

According to Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin (2008), the virtual world is never completely anonymous, as there are various “anchored relationships” or offline based online relationships like with family, friends, and acquaintances. Even complete strangers may share an anchored relationship due to their common workplace, which allows for shared domain access, or knowledge of each other through common friends. This leads to what Zhao et al. (2008) refer to as “nonymous” environment. In comparison to the anonymous world, where users can digress from their offline identity and engage in expressing their tabooed or suppressed identities (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002), the researchers argue that in the nonymous world people have to maintain a certain decorum and abide by the social norms in terms of identity and behaviors, thereby masking their possible real identity. Zhao et al. (2008) categorize Facebook in their study as a nonymous environment due to the social networking site at the time being more prevalent among students who were bound by institutional networks. However, since Facebook went public in 2006 and has grown into one of the most popular SNSs, what has emerged are increasing uses of anonymous profiles – primarily due to privacy concerns over the data being collected by the social networking giant (Nosko, Wood, & Molema, 2010).

Facebook’s “Data Policy” (2019) reports that the site collects all information provided by the user, their networks and connections, payment or transaction information, location data, and any other information provided to affiliated service providers. This data then is used to provide better tailored services, security, and also advertise; further the data is shared with other Facebook companies, and any applications, websites or third-party integrations that are using

Facebook services. Interestingly, apart from basic demographic details, such third-party services can also collect other user information if permitted by the individual, which in turn is subjected to the third-party terms and conditions.

Facebook highlights the point that it does not share any personally identifiable information like photographs or names (Data Policy, 2019). However, that has not allayed the fears of various users and brings up the question of how far an Internet based network like Facebook can be trusted with a person's privacy and confidential information, particularly for vulnerable users like sexual, communal or racial minorities (Nosko, Wood, & Molema, 2010). Further, it has been found that just three important identity markers are enough for the purposes of online identity theft or fraud – full name, full current address and date of birth – information that is often readily available on sites like Facebook (Murray, 2017). Following the 2016 US elections where user data collected through Facebook was severely misused, these concerns are not misplaced. It simply makes the idea of anonymity on any social networking site even more endearing for many users.

As Bullingham & Vasconcelos (2013) found in their study of identity performances on social networking sites, “fear” was a strong determinant for opting for anonymity. This fear was characterized by apprehensions of encountering negative attitude in online interactions, which led users to mask their identity and remain anonymous by using a pseudonym – an identity that can be deleted and therefore allowing with a space to reconstruct a new identity. Christopherson (2007) also identifies anonymity's positive potential to provide privacy, which he terms as important for the psychological well-being of users. However, anonymity also comes with potential negative factors of anti-normative behavior like online aggression, and anti-social

behavior (Christopherson, 2007; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Following from the above mentioned literature, the following research question has been explored in this research:

**RQ1:** What are the reasons LGBTQ individuals create an alternate identity for their online selves?

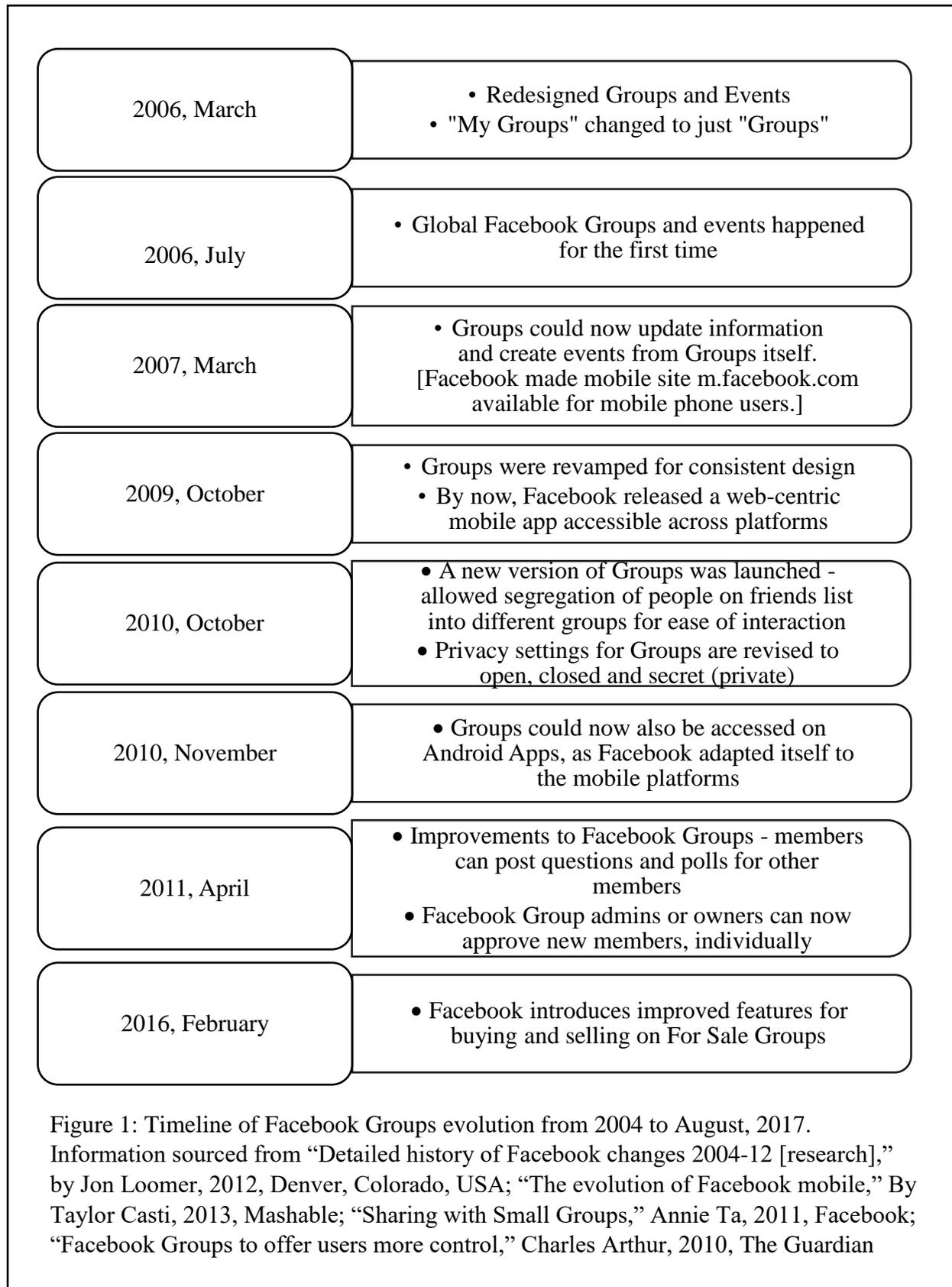
Explored during both phases of the study, the data collected during the first phase was then formed into survey items for the second phase (survey) to better understand and confirm the reasons for the alternate identity use by the LGBTQ identifying participants.

### **Socializing on Facebook Groups**

The Facebook Groups feature was launched in 2004, located in the “About” section of the profile, and featured interests and other activities that users wanted to share about themselves (Products | Facebook Newsroom). Eventually the Facebook Pages was launched in 2007, replacing the traditional Groups; the Groups instead became a feature that allowed users to create a virtual community of people with shared interests or identities (Petronzio, 2013). “*Groups* are a way to truly interact with a group of people, almost as though you were sitting in the same room” (Abram, 2013).

Fascinatingly, on Facebook Group’s information site available online, it shares certain group stories, among which the site features the story of Justin Kamimoto from Fresno, California, who started the Facebook Group, My LGBT Plus in 2010, as a support space for LGBTQ identifying individuals (Facebook Groups, 2017; Stories, 2015). The Group saw a quick addition of over 300 members in little less than 72 hours (My LGBT Plus, 2011). A similar undocumented reaction is happening in India, where Groups for LGBTQ individuals have been formed over the past years, and that is at the center of this research.

*TIME Magazine* documented the changes in picture format of Facebook profiles since 2004, when Facebook was called “The Facebook,” through 2005 when it dropped “the” from the name, till 2014 (Tramz, 2014). What appeared as “My Groups” in the 2004-2006 profiles, changes to “Groups” in the 2006 profiles, the year when Facebook went public for everyone above the age of 13, with valid email addresses. By 2009, Facebook introduced easily navigable privacy settings. Jon Loomer on his website “For Advanced Facebook Marketers” provides a more detailed timeline of the changes that Facebook incorporated over the years up till 2012 (Loomer, 2012) along with a 90 second video capturing the changes (Loomer & Greenhaw, 2012). Following from the information gathered through such sources, it could be assessed that the Groups underwent significant changes since 2006 which can be formed into a timeline as shown in Figure 1 (CNN, 2015; Company Info, 2017; Knibbs, 2014; Loomer, 2012; Suchanek, 2014; Tramz, 2014).



**Facebook Groups Privacy Settings.** The Facebook Group creators can choose among three types of privacy settings – *open*, *closed* and *secret*. The *admin* (short for administrator), who may initiate the Group or is elected as an administrator through an informal or formal process by past administrators, has a significant amount of control over the online community (“How do I change the privacy for a group I admin?,” 2019). The admin controls the privacy settings and thereby who can know of the Group’s existence, who joins the Group, who can post on the Group, what posts are kept or removed, and similarly addition and deletion of members. The admin can also control the members who may harm the Group’s purpose or interest by removing them from the Group. A Group can also have multiple administrators or admins who are responsible for the Group activities (“What are the privacy settings for groups?,” 2019; Ferguson, 2014; Petronzio, 2013).

An open Facebook Group does not have any security feature and anyone can find it, look through the members list and the content, even without being a member. If the user chooses, they can also join the Group. In certain cases, the Groups have a security mechanism which requires new members to be added by existing members, while in others there are no security levels to go through. The closed and secret groups, on the other hand, have privacy settings, and they are only different from each other in terms of accessibility and visibility. A closed group can be searched and seen by the public. But a non-member can look through details such as list of members, admins, group description. The posts or the Group content remains protected. Closed Groups have controlled memberships, but anyone can send in requests to be a part of the group, and on approval by the admin or other members can join it (“What are the privacy settings for groups?,” 2017; Ferguson, 2014; Petronzio, 2013).

A secret Group is only visible to its members and therefore anonymous. A non-member will be unable to locate a secret Group through Facebook searches, even if the name of the Group was known. Therefore, the non-member will not be able to join the Group or see its contents until existing members invite them. Former members of a secret Group however can access the group by searching its name, and see the description and group tags (Facebook, What are the privacy settings for groups?, 2017; Ferguson, 2014; Petronzio, 2013). The popularity of the Facebook's Group feature was evident in Zuckerberg's announcement in January 2016, when more than 1 billion people reportedly used the feature in a single month (Guynn, Facebook Groups reaches 1 billion users, 2016). In 2018, the company shared that the membership on Facebook Groups had continued to increase and they saw 1.4 billion active users every month on the Groups, which was approximately half of all monthly active Facebook users in May 2018 (Facebook Newsroom, 2019; Perez, 2018). Facebook at present allows users to join up to 6,000 Groups on the site (Facebook, 2019).

One of the driving forces behind secret Facebook Groups is "trust" among the Group members, to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of all content and members of that Group. Following the US Presidential Election of 2016, Dreyfuss (2017) highlighted the pros and cons of secret Facebook Groups, which emerged as a safe space for talking about opinions on politics, policies, leaders, and more, with like-minded people. Pantsuit Nation, a secret Facebook Group initially created to rally together Hillary Clinton supporters, became big news at the end of 2016. The Group had evolved into a platform where members shared personal stories and experiences with each other, encouraging and promoting equality and social justice. But the creator of the group, Libby Chamberlain, signed a book deal to be based on the members' posts without consulting them. Chamberlain's actions was seen by the Group members as a breach of trust and

brought the Facebook Group to public attention. Even though Chamberlain assured members that the posts would not be used without permission, it was unacceptable for many that someone was set to make money out of others stories (Alter, 2016; Dreyfuss, 2017). Following from this explication of the Facebook Group settings, it was hypothesized that individuals who joined these Groups were likely to consider the privacy settings of some importance as it afforded them a sense of privacy, which in turn would affect their level of active participation by means of posting or communicating on the Groups.

**H4:** Those who perceive privacy settings of Facebook Groups to be important will indicate a higher level of active participation on the Facebook Groups aimed at LGBTQ community and allies than those who do not.

**Uses of Facebook Groups.** Research into the various functions and uses of Facebooks Groups has led to observations like educational use (Akcaoglu & Bowman, 2016; Dalsgaard, 2016), and better peer-to-peer learning (Cassaniti, Mwaikambo, & Shore, 2014). It can also be used as a support mechanism, as found by Oliver et al. (2015) in their research into how a secret Facebook Group could provide well needed problem solving and grief management for caregivers who are limited by geographical distances from non-virtual support groups. This research was interesting from the perspective of the sense of privacy that the secret Group accorded to the members, and also the fact that it helped transcend all geographical barriers and managed to connect with the target population (Oliver et al., 2015).

Facebook Groups have also been seen as a knowledge-sharing space (Pi, Chou, & Liao, 2013), an avenue for advocacy and activism (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Marichal, 2013), and forming collective identities (Triga & Papa, 2015). Using uses and gratifications theory, Park, Kee and Valenzuela (2009) found that there are four main reasons for users' participation in

Facebook Groups – socializing, entertainment, self-status, information, and in recent years for commercial purposes. Following from these past studies, it was important for the researcher to first explore and then confirm the various possible uses of the Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ members. Therefore, in the first phase of the study the following research question was explored:

**RQ2:** What are the uses of Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ community?

The detailed exposure to some of the online Groups and first person accounts in the first phase led to the development of items that tested the predominant uses of online Groups for the LGBTQ community and answered the following research question:

**RQ3:** To what extent do the Facebook Groups provide the LGBTQ individuals with a space for information and knowledge sharing, psychological support, and a space to build a network?

**Privacy and Security Issues on Facebook.** While this research focuses upon the virtual community space provided by Facebook Groups, it is pertinent to highlight some of the glaring concerns with the social networking platform’s management of user information. It is evident from the Facebook Data Policy over the years that none of the user information provided to Facebook really remains private. Unless an individual creates a fake or alternate profile, the user always stands the risk where their perceivably private information can be made public. This information is not just demographic details or metadata associated with media files (location, time), but includes datapoints on user attitude, interactions, preferences, browsing histories on various devices and browsers (Dewey, 2016). The series of events involving Facebook since 2016 have further cautioned users about the misuse of the data and the extent to which they may have been compromised.

There have been debates with regard to people who do not have a Facebook profile and yet information points on them are available on the platform. Some of that data may come from

information shared by acquaintances, friends and family on their respective individual profiles. But sometimes, the source of the data can also be as unexpected as another website which is partnered with Facebook (Wagner, 2018). To quote from the 2019 Data Policy of Facebook:

Advertisers, app developers, and publishers can send us information through Facebook Business Tools they use, including our social plug-ins (such as the Like button), Facebook Login, our APIs and SDKs, or the Facebook pixel. These partners provide information about your activities off Facebook—including information about your device, websites you visit, purchases you make, the ads you see, and how you use their services—whether or not you have a Facebook account or are logged into Facebook. For example, a game developer could use our API to tell us what games you play, or a business could tell us about a purchase you made in its store. We also receive information about your online and offline actions and purchases from third-party data providers who have the rights to provide us with your information.

Over the decade that Facebook has come into the play, its lax policy for application developers allowed the latter to harvest data from not just users of the apps but also the extended networks. It wasn't until 2014 that Facebook revised its data policy for developers and severed their ability to collect data from the larger network of friends. But if the 2016 US elections and Cambridge Analytica are taken as prime examples, then the damage has been done.

Following the 2016 US elections, Facebook came under fire for their lack of control over the content running on their platform, leading to the disinformation fiasco. Foreign interference in the electoral process of the United States and its alleged ability to influence the election results further brought attention to the social networking platforms, not just Facebook, but also Twitter and YouTube. Internet trolls were hired in order to post socially disruptive content and false

news stories to influence the users, while camouflaging themselves as activists, sympathizers or allies. A trend that continued on a smaller scale into the 2018 mid-term elections in the US, wherein the trolls used a more sophisticated mode of operation and engaged users not just through online rhetoric on Pages and Groups, but also by pushing real-life Events on the platform that can be potentially contentious, such as setting up “a counterprotest to a planned white nationalist rally that was co-hosted by one of the suspicious pages, which also had real groups behind it. The event attracted interest from more than 3,000 users” (Roose, 2018).

What made matters worse for the 2016 US elections was that Facebook had allowed application developers to collect the data of more than 87 million people worldwide, ahead of the elections and the 2014 revisions to their data policy. The information was then used to target audiences within the United States, based on their demographic information and interests, and influence the public’s opinions and thoughts during the elections. However, that number is only reflective of the breach caused during the US elections and may be a conservative estimate of the global damage caused by Facebook. Whistleblowers from Facebook and Cambridge Analytica came forward over 2017 and 2018, and shared their concerns about the social networking site and its lack of knowledge on the extent of the data breach (Parakilas, 2017; The Guardian, 2018). In 2018, Facebook informed the world of yet another data breach of 50 to 90 million accounts due to a vulnerability in its code for the platform’s ‘view as’ feature (Romano, 2018).

During the 2018 joint hearing of the Senate Judiciary and Commerce committees, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg testified repeatedly that it is the people who have the control over their information. Yet research into the policies and the social networking platform’s marketing behavior suggests otherwise. Facebook first introduced the idea of people in control of their own information in 2010, by adding the “Download Your Information” feature on the social

networking platform. It allowed users to download a copy of their Facebook profile in a Zip file format. The 2016 election debacle helped take a closer look at the data collected by Facebook, who owns the data, how it is used and how it has led to the serious implications for the US elections and thereon.

Currently, Facebook provides its users the opportunity to download all of their profile information, and offers the options of selecting specific types of information and date ranges for downloading. According to Nitasha Tiku of *Wired* (2018), while users do have access to all the information they provided Facebook with in the forms of uploads, likes, comments, shares, browsing history and even drafts of unpublished videos, what the platform does not share is the information it collects from the third party apps and advertisers; the information collected through cookies and the users browsing histories.

Privacy issues with Facebook have been a recurring concern ever since the social media platform stepped outside the simple domain of networking and into the world of marketing and profit-making. In an age where information is power, Facebook holds the data of around 2.38 billion monthly active users as of March 31, 2019 (Facebook Newsroom, 2019). Facebook's first tryst with breach of privacy goes back to 2007 when it introduced Beacon and the application allowed users' activities on third party sites to be featured on their friends' news feeds. This information share occurred without any prior consent from the concerned individuals whose activities were being shared. In 2011, Facebook was charged by the Federal Trade Commission for their false claims regarding third-party apps' access to user data. Facebook had initially claimed that the apps could only retrieve information required to operate, but in reality the applications had permission to collect not just the user's but also their extended networks of friends' data. Further in 2013, a bug on Facebook exposed private contact information such as

email addresses and phone numbers of over 6 million unsuspecting Facebook users (Newcomb, 2018).

Since coming into the international spotlight in 2016, Facebook has been continuously revising its privacy and data settings for the users. Being the owner of two other prominent social media players – Instagram and WhatsApp – whose userbase continue to grow, it is without a doubt that each and every move by the social media giant is being closely scrutinized. It was in 2016 that Facebook first introduced the option of allowing users to choose whether they wanted to be shown ads based on their interests or not. In 2017, the platform redesigned “Ad Preferences” section under user settings, allowing the users to review how they are targeted with ads and providing them with a break-up of all details. Facebook further included a section called “Advertisers who have added their contact list to Facebook” that allows users to know more about advertisers who shared a contact list to run ads on Facebook and thereby provided the platform with the user’s contact information.

In 2018, Facebook introduced features such as “Identity Confirmation” for users who would like to “run ads related to politics and issues of national importance.” Within that feature Facebook requires users to turn on the two-factor authentication or TFA for additional layers of security, collect primary country location information, and asks for an official ID such as in case of users located in the US, an American passport, a driver’s licence or state ID alongwith the last four digits to the SSN. As claimed by Facebook, the ID is used to confirm one’s identity and promptly deleted by the management within 30 days.

Applications with access to user information can also be reviewed in detail. Facebook now provides users the option to choose whether they want to delete any content with the user’s information that has been shared by the application. Additionally, the user can also select “turn

off” the “Apps, Websites and Games” feature whereby they can control logging on to third-party sites using their Facebook account.

The problems on Facebook do not end with the user’s information management. Research on social networking platforms have associated problems such as trolling or disruptive behavior on social media (Craker & March, 2016; Lopes & Yu, 2017), doxxing or publishing private information on the Internet (Cho, 2018; Eveleth, 2015), stalking (Lyndon, Bonds-Raacke, & Cratty, 2016), and the psychological effects stemming from fear of missing out or FOMO (Bright & Logan, 2018; Buglass, Binder, Betts, & Underwood, 2017), impacts on individual well-being (Verduyn, et al., 2015). There is a need for increased monitoring of social media sites for disruptive and harmful behavior, but even more importantly users need to be educated about the possible problems and harms that social networking sites can cause. It is not just identifying hate speech, disruptive behaviors, or privacy breaches, but also the psychological and socio-political effects – the hidden costs of using such *free* social networking sites.

The issues that have risen since the 2016 US elections and Cambridge Analytica, and the resulting reconfiguration by Facebook of their News Feeds to combat users exposure to advertisements or targeted content (Bromwich & Haag, 2018), may have impacted the rate of growth among Facebook users, but not necessarily dissuaded them from using it. A 2018 Pew research found that around 42% of the Facebook users surveyed had taken a break from the site in the past year and at least 26% of the participants had deleted the application from their phones (Perrin, 2018). However, in a capitalist democracy where freedom of speech and expression reigns, a space where the publics come together on the Internet, an economy where social media marketing and strategizing on ways to capture audience attention continue to remain a top concern, social networking sites such as Facebook and its subsidiaries continue to thrive. Since

this research focused upon online communities supported by the social networking platform of Facebook, and the use of such space for identity building of the LGBTQ community in India, it was important to highlight the issues associated with the popular site. This section also underscores the need for decentralized networking platforms (such as Diaspora or Mastodon) that do not derive their sustenance from the user data and can benefit the users who are simply looking to communicate and build networks.

### **Chapter Summary**

Breaking down the concept of social media, this chapter has explored the depths of how communication in the social media environment can affect individual identity, and particularly, how the characteristic of anonymity can have a strong impact on self-presentation in the virtual world. Diving into the development of Facebook and prior research conducted on the social networking giant, it has been found that there is a lot of stress on self-presentation and performance of socially desirable identity on such platforms (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Lee, Ahn, & Kim, 2014; Ong, et al., 2011; Toma & Carlson, 2015; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). However, as research also suggests, the variable of anonymity on the Internet has a significant effect on such identity performances. Individuals may perform multiple identities, and even if they are strikingly different from each other, they are at the same time reflective of the same individual (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). In some cases, where individuals perform online identities different from their offline personas, they have reported their virtual personalities as truer than their non-virtual identities (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). This line of inquiry is significant for this research, as it also underlines the possible experiences for many LGBTQ individuals who may perform different online-offline personas, due to social pressures.

This chapter has further outlined Facebook Groups, their purpose, how such groups can be created, and most importantly, defining the different privacy settings for these groups. The three settings play a significant role for this research, as anonymity and privacy is only possible under the closed or secret setting. Prior research conducted into the use of Facebook Groups has led to observations like educational use (Akcaoglu & Bowman, 2016; Dalsgaard, 2016), better peer-to-peer learning (Cassaniti, Mwaikambo, & Shore, 2014), support mechanism (Oliver et al., 2015), knowledge-sharing space (Pi, Chou, & Liao, 2013), an avenue for advocacy and activism (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Marichal, 2013), forming collective identities (Triga & Papa, 2015), and for the purposes of socializing, entertainment, self-status, information, and commerce (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). The concluding thoughts in this chapter attend to the problems of using Facebook, the privacy and data breach facilitated by the social networking giant, and the rising issue of mistrust on Facebook. The following chapter explores the concept of identity – individual and social, and how anonymity affects identity, particularly on social media.

### **Chapter 3: Social Identity and Group Communication on Social Media**

This chapter examines the concept of social identity and delves deeper into how it plays an important role for the individual and their social groups. It leads into the question of how a group is formed, its functions, social norms that often govern the group dynamics, attitudes and conformity (Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, 2010). At all points of time, communication plays a crucial role in not just establishing the channel within groups but also maintaining the channels (Festinger, 1950). This interpersonal communication and the norms associated with it have also been found to be relevant in the case of social media communication (Aral & Walker, 2012; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Blanchard, 2008; Carr, Vitak, & McLaughlin, 2011).

#### **What is Identity?**

Starting with the very basic concept, for the purposes of this research it is important to revisit the idea of *identity* as has been defined in academic literature and understood widely. The *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines the term identity in four different ways. But the definition that echoes the needs of this dissertation is: “The characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is” (Oxford, 2016; Stevenson, 2010). The dictionary also shares the definition of identity as a “a close similarity or affinity,” as a modifier of an object like an identity card, and its mathematical definitions.

The American historian, Philip Gleason traces the semantic history of the term *identity* and emphasizes the ambiguity of the word and its applications for the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in his article (1983). Coming from the Latin word *idem* meaning “the same” and having been in use since the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the English language (Stevenson, 2010), identity took on different connotations over time. Gleason (1983) quotes the *Oxford Dictionary* definition of identity from back in the 1980s and it drew upon the original meaning of sameness, emphasizing

on how a person remains the same and does not become something different, or in other words refers to the individual personality characteristics unique to a person. Gleason underscores that the word identity did not assume an analytical meaning until the 1950s but was used in various spaces in a very informal and vernacular manner to refer to people's personality or individuality.

The post-World War II United States of America found a large number of immigrants seeking refuge and new life on its shores. Among those immigrants were also intellectuals who had escaped from totalitarian regimes. These social thinkers pushed back against mass society and instead steered the conversation towards a need for understanding the relationship between the individual and society. Professor Gleason, whose research interests lie in the area of American intellectual history, further suggests in his comprehensive article (1983) that, terms like “‘alienation,’ ‘anxiety,’ ‘anomie,’ ‘ethnocentrism,’ ‘status consciousness,’ ‘conformity,’ and ‘the need for belonging’,” were used in critique of the emerging American mass society culture of the 1940s to 1980s as the country embraced its role of being a melting pot, thus laying out the base for conceptualization of identity as more than just a vernacular word.

According to Gleason (1983), the popular use of the term identity can be attributed to German-born American psychologist Erik H. Erikson who coined the term *identity crisis* in his 1968 work *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. Erikson's use and conception of identity was deeply influenced by the World War II and his own experiences as an immigrant (Coles, 1974; Erikson, 1959; Gleason, 1983). Erikson's explanation of identity married together the idea of the individual's sense of self or 'ego identity,' and the individual's sense of self as a part of the larger society or 'group identity.' The conceptualization of identity for Erikson stemmed from the struggles that people faced trying to understand their displacement from the home country, followed by emigration and assimilation into the new country and culture, and within all that

determining one's individual identity. This was more than self-conception or answering the question, "Who am I?" (Gleason, 1983).

In his article Gleason (1983) further highlights how some of the social psychology and sociology theories like role theory, reference-group theory, and symbolic interactionism have used the term identity or the meaning of it, but at the same time there is no consensus on what it implies in the two disciplines. While for social psychologists like Erikson, the meaning of identity is that of a process of ascertaining the individual personality through the interaction of the self and the society, for sociologists, identity is seen "as an artifact of interaction between the individual and society" or simply put, being grouped into certain social categories and the acceptance of the said designation (Gleason, 1983). The historian finally concludes with the thought that the popular application of identity is as used in social psychology.

In a later study, political scientist James D. Fearon (1999) summarized all the definitions of identity into three modes of application for his field – as a social category or group membership, as self-defining characteristics which the individual identifies, such as being a football fan or Caucasian, and finally a combination of the previous two forms. During his research, he also found that between 1981 and 1995, the number of dissertations that had used the word "identity" in just the abstracts had increased by almost three times, from 709 to 1,911. This trend reflected the growing popularity of the identity concept.

Drawing from these early explications and revisiting the roots of the term identity, it can be said that the concept refers to the words or categories that help to put social beings into certain groups. The characteristics of these groups are in turn heavily guided by the biological, social and cultural categories like gender, race, religion, nationality. An individual can belong to multiple groups, and according to Turner (1982), by outlining what groups or categories a person

belongs to, it also suggests what the person does not identify as. During the course of this research, it has been interesting to observe the appropriation of the term identity in various fields and its use in studying constructs like identity theft (Nosko, Wood, & Molema, 2010), identity crisis (Brookes, 1999; DeCamp, Koenig, & Chisolm, 2013), identity politics (Bennett, 2012; Chuma, 2012), gender identity (Zayer, Sredl, Parmentier, & Coleman, 2012), sexual identity (Rosenmann & Safir, 2006). The authors or researchers however seldom seem to delve deeper into the concept of identity as explicated in the above few paragraphs, but directly explore the construct that is of interest to the study, for example in this case, social identity.

### **Social Identity Theory**

The concept of social identity in social psychology was first initiated by British social psychologist Henri Tajfel in the 1970s and emerged as a result of research on intergroup conflicts and discrimination. Around that period a number of research studies were also looking into intergroup relations like that of Muzafar Sherif's "boys' camp studies" from 1949 to 1954. Going against the popular notion that individuals can be inherently hostile, it established that separating people into groups and manipulating the relations can lead to intergroup hostility. Following the period of the German Holocaust (1939-1945), many Jewish psychologists and social psychologists had started asking questions to answer the intergroup hostility which resulted in the human tragedy. It was perplexing at that point as to how groups of people could turn against each other to the extent of causing harm and violence (Reicher et al., 2010). These studies eventually became relevant for understanding group communication as they outlined the group characteristics, norms, influence and conformity levels, which have been discussed in more details later in the chapter.

The United States of the 1960s witnessed massive reformations as Bob Dylan's 1964 song goes – “The Times They are a Changin’.” It was marked by movements based on race, gender and sexuality, including the Civil Rights movement, the Women's Equal Pay movement, the American Gay Rights movement and the Vietnam War (“The 1960s,” 2010). Meanwhile in Britain, the ‘swinging sixties’ transformed the country's socio-cultural scape and led to what has been recognized as the period of liberation from the dominant high culture based on class and gender. The cultural revolutions driven by the youth, in the areas of music and fashion, the rise of the independent woman and technological advancements, had led to a heightened sense of individuality and portrayed a political challenge to the established system (Brown, 2012; Watson, 2016). The question of identity and more importantly group identity as perceived by the individual actors had become an area of much-needed research (Reicher et al., 2010). The social identity theory by Tajfel and Turner (1979) came up against this background of social changes and a series of studies like the Minimal Group Studies (Tajfel et.al., 1971). The findings were aimed to explain the bias that impacted intergroup relations and understand the “minimal conditions” required for negative sentiments to emerge between different groups (Reicher et al., 2010).

Henri Tajfel first defined social identity in “Social Categorization,” the English manuscript of “La catégorisation sociale,” in S. Moscovici's edited *Introduction à la psychologie sociale* (1972, p.31), as “the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of the group membership” (Turner, 1982, p.18). A social group, as defined by Turner (1982, p.15) refers to, “two or more individuals who share a common social identification of themselves or, which is nearly the same thing, perceive themselves to be members of the same social category.” These definitions form

the basic crux of the social identity theory which suggests that an individual's self-concept is strongly guided by social group membership held at various points of time and the salience of that group to the individual.

**Individual and Group Identity.** The concept of identity, as discussed earlier, refers to the individual personality development that occurs through the actor's interaction with the larger society. The social identity theory suggests that in addition to the individual aspect there is also the social part to the identity. For example, a person who identifies as a cisgender female is not only defining the self but is also highlighting her membership to the group of people all over the world who willingly conform to their biological sex. Therefore, this categorization of the self while may define the individual's self-identity, it also indirectly suggests the social identity that the person conforms to. According to Reicher et al. (2010) "this concept (social identity) provides a bridge between the individual and the social and how it allows one to explain how socio-cultural realities can regulate the behaviours of individuals" (p. 50).

Following from the social identity theory, individuals may be deeply attached to their social or group identity as it lends a sense of pride to them, which in turn can lead to the psychological differentiation of 'us' vs 'them.' However, it does not imply that either parts of the identity – individual and social – outweighs in importance to the other. The group dynamics between an individual's role for in-group against an out-group is often governed by the "positive differentiation along *valued dimensions of comparison*" (Reicher et al., 2010, p.49). This implies that even though the social identity theory suggests that people differentiate between their in-group and out-group based on their group affiliation, the outcome of that relation cannot be pre-determined but is rather dependent upon the social contexts of those groups. It is only when the differences between the groups are relevant to the group members or are "valued dimensions of

comparison” that it will become a matter of concern and can lead to conflict and hostility (Reicher et al., 2010). For example, for a homosexual female advocating for LGBTQ rights, the opposition can come in the form of groups against LGBTQ rights, which may include the authorities, the society or formalized groups that are anti-LGBTQ.

However, a strong sense of social identity and group differentiation does not imply negative results. Tajfel and Turner’s social identity theory suggests how individuals’ social identity can help to identify people with shared identities and create a more unified effort towards social changes. Such as the feminist movement, which rose in popularity during the 1960s in many of the Western countries including the United States and was based in women’s realization of their shared identities and need for social changes. It has led to political campaigns and calls for reforms on issues like women’s suffrage, reproductive rights, equal pay and opportunities.

In an attempt to look beyond the social identity theory that outlines the manner in which group membership affects the intergroup behavior, Turner et al. (1987,1994) introduced the self-categorization theory (SCT) to explain how individuals come to categorize themselves into certain groups in the first place. The SCT proposes that based on the individual perceptions of social reality, every person engages in a cognitive categorization of the self into certain identity groups or what Festinger (1950) called “psychological groups.” This process is again replicated when identifying other people and putting them into certain groups that the individual perceives as relevant in the given context and experience of reality. “We organize people into categories because this is how they are organized in the real world. To do so is not inaccurate [*sic*] it is functional” (Reicher et al., 2010, p.55). For example, in the context of a university, a doctoral

scholar can categorize their self into the group of university students, and also as an employee, due to an assistantship position.

The individual experiences further inform the meaning and belief systems attached to the various social categories, which in turn impacts the actor's behavior at both the individual and group level. By correlation, it also affects the kind of behavior or characteristics expected of the other groups as opposed to the self or the in-group; in other words, engaging in the process of stereotyping. Similarly, the self-categorization theory can also explicate other group processes such as group judgment, cohesion and social influence (Reicher et al., 2010).

A central aspect to both the social identity theory and the self-categorization theory is the social group. Following from the above literature on the social identity theory and the process of self-categorization, it is important to understand how social groups function. Since this research focuses upon how Internet based groups lead to LGBTQ identity construction, it is essential to touch upon group communication, briefly attend to the concepts of norms, influence and conformity in the group processes, and focus upon group communication in the context of social media.

### **The Need for Group Communication**

There is a need for spontaneous communication, in order for social groups to function effectively. Since the 1930's there have been several studies in the field of social psychology and communication that have focused on the way that social groups work and how communication plays a role in them. There are studies particularly looking into how social identity, influence and conformity impact intra and inter group relations (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

Leon Festinger, in his article “Informal Social Communication” (1950) emphasizes that communication is instrumental for social groups in their quest for uniformity among members. This need for uniformity is derived from what the American social psychologist identifies as social reality and group locomotion. The social reality implies having shared beliefs and opinions about the larger reality. If this reality is different for different members, then they will cease to be a part of the same group. The idea of group locomotion is that the similarity among the group members will lead to having the same goals as a group and therefore result in a faster movement of the group towards that goal. The affinity among the group members makes communication crucial as per Festinger (1950).

Hypothesizing about situations where group members strive towards uniformity like in the case of disagreement on certain issues, Festinger (1950) suggests that the majority group opinion holders are likely to influence the minority opinion holder. However, this communication process will only be persistent or increase when the member is considered important to the group or it is believed that their opinion can be changed, and the group uniformity maintained. This has brought forth the point of *social influence* that impacts group members. At the same time, if the minority opinion holder is intent on continuing with the group membership, there will be a push towards simply conforming to the majority opinion and communication is likely to bring about that change. Festinger further hypothesized that the stronger the group is in terms of shared beliefs and goals, the stronger is the contrast when differences crop up in the form of opinions or simply motivation to change status within the group or move to another group. Any such differences or disruption to the group uniformity can lead to increased communication among the members and an equally increased chance of rejection or ejection from the group (Festinger, 1950).

Following from the support for Festinger's hypotheses and the social identity approach, it can be argued that social groups are formed on the basis of shared identity, beliefs, opinions and goals. However, when differences crop up within such groups, the groups do not necessarily break up, but there are forces of influence and conformity at play. The group members feel compelled to follow the established group norms, which are in turn formed through communication among group members.

Eagly and Chaiken (1993) observed that with increasing studies focusing on the social group and influence in the 1950s, it was evident that groups always have some established rules or standards to follow. For example, a devoted soccer fan will know all the rules of the game, the best players and may even go out of their way sporting their team color on clothes, faces or body. Such expressions of fandom are standards set by the larger social group of sports fans and it is expected that people who identify as diehard followers will adhere to those rules.

The establishment of group norms imply that members will conform to the rules. However, in the event of deviation from the group norms and thereby affecting the uniformity among members, there is a push towards influencing the deviant member into conformity. Research on social influence in groups formally began with Muzafar Sherif's autokinetic effect experiment in 1935 and then Solomon Asch's optical illusion experiments in 1951 and 1956 (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Gass & Seiter, 2007). The studies led to a distinction between two types of influences – normative and informational, as proposed by Deutsch and Gerard in 1955 (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993).

Following from the idea of social norms, the normative influence occurs when individuals conform with the expectations of one another or the standard social norms, for instance shaking hands in the western culture. But when individuals accept information available

through other group members as evidence of reality it leads to an informational influence, as was the case in Asch's optical illusion experiment where subjects accepted the information relayed by the majority as the reality of how the experimental figures sizes compared to each other. Therefore, social influence broadly refers to the power that other group members possess to guide the decisions made by any individual member.

It was during this period of 1950's and 1960's that social conformity also became a major topic of research and led to studies that suggested people in a group setting are likely to conform to the majority opinion. The idea of conformity refers to what Crutchfield defines as "yielding to group pressures" (1955). It refers to the result of social influence whereby individuals consent or submit to changes in behavior, attitude or characteristic to be able to fit into a particular group. The social influence and conformity research led to theorization of many of the group characteristics and norms that stood out. The social impact theory by Latané (1981), and Latané and Wolf (1981), assumes that an individual is influenced by its group's physical characteristics such as the influential strength of the group, the proximity of the individual to the group in terms of both space and time at the moment of influence, and finally the number of members present in the group. It also posits that with an increase in number, the group will have more influence on individuals' conformity level, however the individual members who are added have lesser influence as a unit, or the incremental impact slows down. In essence, the group size matters. Tanford and Penrod (1984) came up with the social influence model which suggests that a group needs to be three or more to have influential power over decision making or conformity process (Gass & Seiter, 2007).

Social identity and ability of groups to influence individuals can also be found in the concept of deindividuation. Festinger, Pepitone and Newcomb (1952) suggest that a group

setting often leads to a loss of self-awareness and individuality, or a state of deindividuation, where the group identity takes precedence over the individual identity. This means greater unity among the group members. Emerging from studies of crowd psychology, the three social psychologists concluded that deindividuation leads to lower self-restraints and higher group immersion, which results in less stable group settings. Unlike previous theories that suggested the individuals will adopt the group psychology, Festinger et al. (1952) posited that it is the loss of inner restraints in the group settings or the feeling of anonymity that lead to chaotic situations like mob mentality. Due to the lack of stability it is considered as a socially undesirable setting.

Continued research into the proposition of deindividuation theory however has been unable to suggest that the anti-normative behavior by individuals in a group setting is a result of anonymity. It has instead been found that the situational norms of the groups have a major impact on the variance of effect on the individual behavior. So basically, in a deindividuated state, people do not become anti-normative but rather are more aware of the environmental cues and act according to the expected or desirable behavior. In other words, they become more aware of the group as a whole (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998). Reicher had predicted earlier that in a deindividuated state people do not lose their self-awareness but simply shift from their individual identity to one of the many social identities that they possess in their daily lives (1982).

### **Social Identity and Virtual Communities**

Following from the previous chapter discussing social media platforms and communication, it is interesting to note how the Internet has brought about a space for observation of social behavior unique to the virtual space. Anonymity, or the lack of it, given that most Internet user data can be mapped out, has led people to opt for various methods of communication like video chat, instant message, emails, group chats, etc. At the same time, it

has also provided an opportunity to adopt identities as considered appropriate in the virtual context (Christopherson, 2007; Ellis, 2010). An individual may adopt their daily personality of a straight white male for their Facebook profile while networking with co-workers, friends and family, and at the same time have an alternate profile on a dating website seeking gay men, thereby taking advantage of the anonymity lent by virtual networks. This instance resonates with Reicher's explanation of multiple identities that people possess at any one point of time (1982). The social media platform allows for the individual's multiple persona and social identity to play out along the lines of Goffman's theorization about the "presentation of self," as discussed earlier in Chapter 2.

According to Postmes, Spears, & Lea (1998), computer mediated communication (CMC) or the Internet have the advantages of being a universal medium, allowing for personal, group and mass communication and is the "first uniquely undedicated communication technology." The last point implies its ability to accommodate various modes of communication – audio, video, text, etc. However, they also highlight the disadvantages of bridging the distance between people and reducing the need for face-to-face communication. It can lead to a potential lack of self awareness or personal identity, decrease awareness about the people communicating over the Internet, and there is a lack of visible social cues present in physical face-to-face conversations.

The study of social identity and influence found a renewed amount of research interest with the advent of social media communication, and more importantly the existence of virtual communities (Aral & Walker, 2012; Blanchard, 2008; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Carr, Vitak, & McLaughlin, 2011; Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004). The networked society, much like its offline counterpart, exhibits different kinds of groups and communities which exist on the various branches of the world wide web. Some are purely based in the virtual world, like a

network of online gamers, who may be located across diverse geolocations and yet belong to a specific group, playing a particular game, and competing against each other. Then there are virtual networks of people like Reddit-ors who do not necessarily belong in a particular group within Reddit but are simply a part of the network. Further there are groups on the world wide web who network virtually and then meet in the physical world (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004).

In group settings like that of Reddit, Facebook, Pinterest, and LinkedIn, among others, individuals gain membership by association to other group members or in terms of common goals or interests. The characteristics of such CMC groups are similar and yet very different to the groups organized in the physical world as highlighted above. Unlike the groups outside the Internet, communication in the virtual space helps break down physical and social boundaries among CMC group members, and also counters the regulatory function of social norms due to the relative anonymity and freedom accorded by the medium (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998). However, that does not imply the virtual groups are norm free. Similar to any other group norm formation, the CMC groups establish their rules and standards through communication and majority agreement or accepted consistencies over time. The continuous interaction among the group members using a certain language, words or content type, establishes those behaviors or attitudes as the group's normative manner of interaction (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2000).

According to Postmes et al., (2000), deviation from the norms may not be accepted, however, they do evolve with time and the socio-cultural context, building a stronger group identity, and thereby exert greater social influence. The group norms however are applicable only to that group's communication; they will change with social context and audiences (Carr, Vitak, & McLaughlin, 2011).

**Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects.** A theory in social psychology and communication studies, the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE) addresses group behavior and conformity in a computer mediated communication environment. The SIDE model argues that the *anonymity* lent by computer-mediated group communications heightens the individual's level of identification with the group or the social identity leading to increased group immersion (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998). Following from the social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), which posits that an individual's sense of identity stems from the social groups that they belong to such as their country, family, university, sport club, etc., it was analyzed that individuals also joined CMC groups based on that social identity (Postmes et al., 1998).

The SIDE model came up as a critique of the classic deindividuation theory (Festinger et al., 1952) which addresses what is more colloquially known as the "mob mentality." It refers to the group immersive behavior and loss of self-restraints and morals. This theory is similar to the risky shift phenomenon as proposed by James Stoner in 1961, which suggests that the individuals when in a group setting are more likely to make "riskier" decisions than when alone (Gass & Seiter, 2007; Stoner, 1961).

However, both the theories were critically evaluated, and further studies failed to support the claims made in them. The risky shift phenomenon found a better explanation in group polarization phenomenon (Myers & Arenson, 1972), where it is argued that groups lead to a more polarized or extreme decision making – which may or may not be negative. Similarly, deindividuation found its critique in Stephen Reicher's essay (1982), where he identifies deindividuation as a prominent area of research into crowd psychology, but with limitations. With the help of studies conducted into identifying deindividuation effects among males,

females, soldiers and various other groups, Reicher argues that as opposed to the deindividuation theory's proposition that the individual loses one's self-identity when in a group, they rather refocus their identity onto one of the many identities that they possess. Deindividuation found a better explanation as being a state where an individual has a heightened sense of one's group identity and desire to enact the expected normative actions. Further Reicher also highlights the deindividuation theory's stress on anonymity as a cause for possible loss of self-identity; in a crowd situation, even if it is a large group, the participants will still be discernible and identifiable to a certain extent (1982).

Picking up where Reicher left off, the SIDE model was first proposed by Tom Postmes and Martin Spears in 1991 and was conceptually developed over a number of publications with Martin Lea, Stephen Reicher, and others on board over the next decade (Lea, Spears, & DeGroot, 2001; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998, 2000; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). The SIDE model has also led to several studies conducted into the effects of anonymity on computer-mediated communications, and it has found support on multiple occasions. Postmes et al. (1998) highlight the basic characteristics of the SIDE model as follows: Firstly, the anonymity and group immersion in computer mediated communication environment can lead to a heightened sense of group identity. Secondly, individual perception of differences between self and others is not as individuals, but rather on the basis of the wider social categories they belong to. This factor of depersonalization follows from Turner's self-categorization theory (1987) where individuals cognitively assign themselves into certain groups, in addition to which the SIDE model suggests that there will be a focus on shared similarity rather than differences in the group setting. There is a move away from "me vs others" to "we vs others." Thirdly, the medium of communication in case of such Internet based groups provides a social environment where shared group identity,

cues and behaviors gain more importance. This is because of lack of information about individual differences, and therefore, resulting in a medium that is “highly socially engaging” (Lea & Spears, 1995).

Continued studies on the effect of the SIDE model and understanding the group norms in CMC situation resulted in the following broad conclusions:

- a) Anonymity can lead individuals to attend/conform to group norms (Lea, Spears, & DeGroot, 2001; Postmes, Spears, Sakhel, & de Groot, 2001).
- b) Anonymity makes groups more efficiency oriented (Postmes at al., 1998; Postmes at al., 2001).
- c) Groups establish norms through interaction, and critical norms regarding joint projects and decision making improves group performance (Postmes at al., 1998, 2000).
- d) There are stronger in-group vs out-group identification, and groups may emerge as a preferred level of self-definition (Postmes et al., 1998).
- e) CMC can aid in redrawing the social boundaries for groups, as well as individuals. However, it will not prescribe any particular direction, rather it will be dependent upon the social actor’s motivations and desires as to how these boundaries will be redefined in the virtual environment (Postmes et al., 1998).

Kim and Park (2011) found that following from the SIDE model, visual similarity in the virtual appearance of individuals lead to a stronger conformity to group identity and intention. Visual similarity here refers to the profile or avatars of group members’ in the virtual world, and the perceived level of uniformity in appearance among all. Such as, individuals displaying their support for LGBTQ rights by sporting the rainbow colors or badge on their Facebook profile

pictures. However, following from the optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991; Lee E.-J. , 2004) individuals neither like too much similarity, nor do they like to be too different. Therefore, higher the level of perceived deindividuation, lower the level of conformity intention to group norms. Simply put, while similarity is good, there should be space for individuation.

Carr et al. (2011) emphasize that most SIDE research treats in-group and out-group as exclusives. In reality there are overlapping boundaries of one's in-group and out-group, and how far the out-groups influence people depends upon the *exhibition of cues* that are in relation to the in-group and its members. The stronger the in-group and out-group cues, the stronger the social identification. However, in the case of weak cues from both the in-group and out-group members, it will lead to a lower level of identification and may result in similar behavior towards both the members and non-members. For example, in the case of a Facebook support group for LGBTQ rights in India, a strong cue from fellow members can be a profile picture showing support for gay rights, while a weak cue can be a profile picture with no sign of being involved in the LGBTQ movement. At the same time, in the larger social network of Facebook, non-members sporting profile pictures that express homophobia or anti-gay slogans, will provide with a strong cue for being out-group members. But a profile picture that neither exhibits support or opposition for the movement, but is relatively neutral, will be seen as an out-group member with weak cues. Carr et al. (2011) found that group members are likely to have similar levels of social identification with in-group members exhibiting weak cues and out-group members also exhibiting weak cues.

This research revolves around understanding how the social media space can be significant for the purposes of the LGBTQ identity construction. It explores the impact that the

perception of anonymity lent by social networking sites, like Facebook, can have on identity construction. Following from the literature presented in this chapter, it was hypothesized that:

**H5:** Participants who indicate a high level of perceived anonymity will also indicate high levels of active participation than those who exhibit lower level of perceived anonymity.

**H6** Perceived anonymity on the Facebook Groups meant for the LGBTQ identifying members relates to self-awareness within the online space.

**H7a.** Those who sense higher levels of perceived anonymity on the groups are likely to indicate a higher perception of group identity than those who exhibit lower level of perceived anonymity.

**H7b.** Those who indicate high active participation are likely to exhibit stronger group identity than those who indicate lower level of active participation.

## **Chapter Summary**

The primary aim for this research is to understand how Indian LGBTQ individuals, with access to the Internet, are using online communities like Facebook Groups towards their identity construction. This chapter has outlined the historical development of the concept of identity (Gleason, 1983), as it is one of the most crucial aspects for the study. Erikson's definition of the term identity, which refers to both the individual self and the social self, underscores the point as to how identity can have two halves – one that is reflective of the individual's idea of one's own self, and the other that is echoing the society's idea about the individual. This in turn is integral to understanding how LGBTQ individuals may face a crisis when it comes to identity, as the society defines them in terms that may be alienating from their self-conception.

The social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) answers the question of how LGBTQ individuals identify themselves as queer through their group memberships. As suggested in the above extensive literature, an individual's concept of the self is heavily dependent upon the social groups they are a part of. It not only defines the individual characteristics, but also how in-group and out-group dynamics are at play all the time. Self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987-1994) further adds that it is an individual who categorizes their own self into various groups based on their social context. These categories or groups are governed by shared beliefs, ideas, characteristics, needs, and have a major role play in terms of influence and conformity. This points towards how a group can effectively be influential for an LGBTQ individual, and impact their behavior and attitude, as in the case of mobilizing opinion and action against Section 377 and the authorities. Following from the literature, the LGBTQ community, which is a minority within the larger Indian society, can influence or impact some of the society, and get the public thinking about ideas that are different from the majority narrative (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

In the realm of the Internet, research into online groups has also shown that strong similarities exist between a face-to-face group and an online community, like establishing and following group norms (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Festinger, 1950; Gass & Seiter, 2007), the group's purpose and value for an individual (Dholakia et al., 2004). Finally, the Internet also accords its users with anonymity and thereby relative freedom. This anonymity forms the basis of the social identity model of deindividuation effects or SIDE model (Lea, Spears, & DeGroot, 2001; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998, 2000; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). In this dissertation, the SIDE model provides a basis for understanding and researching into how anonymity of the web leads to group immersion and thereby strengthens the social identity,

particularly in case of LGBTQ individuals. This chapter has therefore brought together not only identity, but also how that identity is formed, what role social groups play for an individual and their identity formation, the group communication norms, and how this entire process takes place in an online setting, with its unique characteristics like anonymity. The next chapter explores the queer identity literature, and how social media plays a role in it.

## Chapter 4: Queer Identity and Social Media

“Coming-out” has come to be a phrase associated with the LGBTQ community, and to signify the process whereby the individual expresses their non-normative gender and/or sexual identity to family, friends, and sometimes the larger society (Malti-Douglas, 2007). It is essentially a challenge to the institutionalized identity structures, as an individual breaks out of the established categories and seeks to construct an identity outside the normative set. However, to be able to realize one’s identity as being non-normative, the individuals need a point of reference or knowledge that will enlighten them about the possibilities of an alternative. Further, a support system guides them into the safe space where they can realize themselves. In a socio-cultural context, like that of India, there is little to no conversation on the subject of gender and sexuality, as majority of the population accepts the normalized identity categories. Religion, politics, and economics further contribute to the ignorance or avoidance about the alternate debate. Thus, the reference about alternate identities is typically lacking for many of the individuals who struggle to identify with the cisgender and/or heteronormative identity they are assigned at birth. This research investigates the potential that online groups such as Facebook Groups hold for filling in this gap, wherein the virtual communities become the space where the questioning and/or curious individuals may find support as they construct their identity, both social and personal.

The concept of constructing an identity is central to this study and has been a focal point in all the previous chapters. May it be in terms of social media and virtual identity creations (Chapter 2), or how social identity is formed, and its role in communication within virtual communities (Chapter 3). This chapter takes the conversation forward into the aspect of gender and sexuality based identity construction. Briefly touching upon the context of India, this chapter

dives into the established use of social media among the queer, particularly in terms of identity performances and construction.

## **Gender and Sexuality**

Prior to investigating any further into the potential of social media platforms on identity construction, it is important to formulate an understanding of what is gender and sexuality. The very basic starting point is that of biological sex, which has broadly been categorized across the world, as male and female, based on the anatomical differences, or intersex, where the physical body exhibits characteristics that “do not fit typical binary notions” (Fact Sheet: Intersex, 2017). The term gender is used to refer to the social meaning attached to each of the recognized biological sexes, and the expected normative behavior and roleplay (gender expression). The gender identity again is largely recognized as a binary of man and woman, which in turn governs the dominant sexual orientation – heteronormative, or a procreative sexual relation between the male and the female (Malti-Douglas, 2007; Weaver, 2013). Only a handful of countries, including India, recognize a third or fourth gender category outside the binary, such as Argentina, Colombia, Ireland, Malta, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan. Countries such as New Zealand and Australia, instead of providing definite categories, allow individuals to list themselves as “unspecified” in place of gender. Denmark on the other hand has been reconsidering the entire purpose of keeping gender as an identity marker in their official documentation (Ghoshal & Knight, 2016).

Today, the normative structure is being challenged in terms of biological sex, gender identity and expression, and sexual orientation. The demand for breaking down the boundaries and categories and allowing people to be free of such binding identity markers has been a rising conversation in many societies. Being genderless, sexless, sexual orientation less and expression

less is but for the ideal world. Emma Watson being awarded the first gender-neutral acting prize at the MTV Movie and TV Awards on May 7, 2017, perhaps speaks to this very challenge that is being posed at the structural level. Traditionally, the acting awards across most popular culture platforms, have always been categorized in terms of the gender binary. With Watson's award, however, there is a distinct call for providing an equal platform to all actors irrespective of their sex and gender (Shea, 2017).

An increased amount of stress has been laid upon the recognition of a spectrum of such identity markers, which define not only how an individual perceives themselves, but also how they are perceived by others; the behavior, attitude and expectations that are attached to that individual's social role (Henig, 2017; Wu, 2016). Educating the masses about the possibilities is perhaps an important first step towards creating a more inclusive social structure. Individuals need to be socialized into a concept of freedom, wherein they have a knowledge about gender identity beyond the binary like genderqueer, transgender, gender-fluid; expressing gender as not only feminine or masculine, but also as androgynous; the possibility of being an intersex person, and not only male or female; accepting that one's sexual orientation does not stop at heterosexuality, but may be defined by homosexuality, bisexuality, asexuality, and a plethora of other options.

### **Gender and Sexuality Identity Construction**

In the previous chapter, there is an in-depth exploration of the concept of identity, particularly in terms of individual and group/social identity. What is important to note is the stress laid upon the interaction between the individual and the larger society, which governs the individual personality construction and development (Gleason, 1983; Turner, 1982). Berger & Luckmann (1966) also stressed the role of social interactions, wherein people initially categorize

everyone into identifiable and acceptable normative groups, and with continued use it turns into “habitualized actions.” In their book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, they further express how these actions result in a counter-action or reciprocation, and eventually this cycle gives way to social roles. The social role then undergoes a process of institutionalization, with continued reference and interaction, and the society eventually attaches certain meaning to the roles, in the form of certain expected behavior, responsibilities, and obligations (Weaver, 2013).

Simply put, this becomes the structure of reality for every social human being. For example, a female teenager referred to as a daughter during her interactions with the parents, will lead the social meaning attached to the role of being a progeny to be internalized by all the participants in the process. This comes to define the reality for the family, and the identity of an individual becomes a part of this larger map (Weaver, 2013). However, it is important to note here that while society does take an active role in the assignment of social roles, it does not imply that the individual is without control or has no agency in the construction of their identity, and social reality. It is when the individual perception of their identity differs from the institutionalized structure, that there is resistance and challenges to the social reality. In most cases, people subdue their desires, and accept their identity as assigned by the social system so that they can peacefully coexist. Resistance to the existing system is often met with social punishments and being ostracized from the social groups (Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, 2010; Weaver, 2013).

As Weaver (2013) states in his research, that it is this potential of some form of punishment for stepping outside the normative boundaries, that is at “the root of human complacency in identity formation.” If India is considered in this context, research into homosexual men has shown that most of them choose to get married and settle down in a

heteronormative setting of a family life and live up to the societal norms. The possibility of negotiating with the society and creating an identity which is socially undesirable is not even considered for fear of ostracization (Afzal, 2005; Boyce, 2006). In some cases, both in India and the US, men who have sex with men, do not necessarily identify as a possible non-heterosexual individual (Boyce, 2006; Cohen, 2012; Pathela, Hajat, Schillinger, Blank, Sell, & Mostashari, 2006). But Khanna (2007) argues that there are diverse understandings of gender and sexuality, and thereby different outcomes for individuals who may not know whether they fit into those categories or not. For example, as blogger Paul Varnell, with the Independent Gay Forum (2006), reasoned that a possible reason for New York City MSM to continue identifying as heterosexual persons, may be closely related to the behavioral markers that are associated with the identity category of “gay”: such as going to parties, multiple partners, being fashionable. The stereotypes associated with the gay identity are internalized by the MSM individuals, and thereon impact their own identity construction as a gay or bisexual person, since they do not observe any commonalities.

If identity is considered as a set of behavior, it is only logical to consider that individuals determine their social roles based upon the observable commonalities between the roles, the people playing those roles and their own selves in each context (Calhoun, 1994; Weaver, 2013). It helps to situate themselves within the larger social structure and thereon determine their identity. As a child, an individual learns about their identity markers, social roles, and associated behaviors through various processes, which can be explained using the psychoanalytic theory, social learning theory and cognitive development theory (Bem, 1981). For instance, Bandura’s social learning theory (1961) explains how individuals model their behavior based upon observations of other’s actions, in a social context. His later social cognitive theory further

expanded upon the former research and suggests that the type of outcome of the observed behavior impacts the modeling of such actions (Bandura, 2009). Bem (1981), while laying out her gender schema theory, particularly stresses this learning process whereby the “rewards and punishments for behaving in sex-appropriate ways” affects how children learn about sex-typing. Sex-typing can be defined as the process whereby certain concepts and personality attributes are assigned to the sexes in different cultural contexts. Observing the favorable outcomes of behaving in contextually appropriate manner impacts the cognitive structure of every individual (Bem, 1981).

The social stigma associated with gender ambiguity and non-normative sexuality has broadly led many of the queer identifying population – both as individuals and as groups – to resort to constructing alternate identities. There is a level of secrecy and privacy around the creation of such multiple identities, as Khan (2014) found in his research while investigating the identity politics of the *khawaja siras* or gender ambiguous people of Pakistan. This secrecy is a device necessitated by the fear of oppression meted out to minority population in most societies and have often led gender ambiguous people to devise various methods of concealment of their alternate identity. Khan (2014) further notes in his work that the interactions between the *khawaja siras* and the public could be likened to a highly strategic game, where the former uses covert methods of concealment and misrepresentation of their own selves in the public eye, to provide with incomplete and confused knowledge, and thereby practicing self-preservation. This idea of self-preservation can be tied into how social media platforms can be seen as a space where individuals can create multiple alternate identities, mainly for the purposes of self-preservation against the intolerance of the larger society.

## **Queer Identity on Social Media**

Queer communication in the social media environment has been a subject of much research in the past two decades. The ease of technology use and the growing conversation around equal rights and social justice, irrespective of social identity markers, seems to have advanced such studies, like that into online sexuality (Rosenmann & Safir, 2006), identity construction using Facebook (Cooper & Dzara, 2010), identity management and performances on Facebook (Duguay, 2016), among others.

Rosenmann and Safir (2006), explored how paraphilics or the sexually deviant, a group of minorities who are shunned by the non-virtual world, resort to the virtual world to interact with similar others, resulting in an eventual sexual identity empowerment. Though their research does not specifically focus upon the LGBTQ community, but rather a broader idea of tabooed sexual practices, they do touch upon some important concepts relevant to this dissertation. Rosenmann and Safir (2006) emphasize the lack of acceptance and isolation in the non-virtual world, which acts as a “push” away from the offline world and makes the “pulls” into the relative comforts of the virtual world more endearing. They use the concepts of lurking and re-learning in their research, which can very well be adapted to any online group settings. The lurkers or observers of the group activities are essentially non-interactive and virtually invisible members, who seek the groups for the purposes of positive reinforcement. Further, the study suggests that both lurking and active participation can impact re-learning or gathering information and meaning sharing about how to perform the identity that ties the group together. This entire process can eventually result in a “virtual self-disclosure” or coming out into the open about their identity.

Cooper and Dzara (2010), in their study investigate the use of Facebook by LGBTQ identifying users and make some significant observations in terms of identity construction, management and negotiation, and activism, in a rural American social setting. They found that the use of Facebook is complicated since many of the participating individuals are not open about their sexuality or gender identity and choose to keep that part of their identity out of the realm of social media. As discussed earlier in the second chapter, Goffman's (1963) theorization about performances in social interactions becomes relevant here, as individuals may then choose to perform single or multiple online identities, and a similar or completely different offline identity, depending upon the individual context. Which performance becomes the front stage is entirely contextual and relational to the individual's need. But the anonymity accorded by the Internet provides the participants with an opportunity to adopt characteristics, attitudes and behavior that are not usually associated with their social role (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Miller & Arnold, 2009; Welles, 2007; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008).

Duguay (2016) investigated into the impact of contextual collapse and technological affordances on identity performances and self-disclosure among LGBTQ identifying individuals. Considering the platform of Facebook, the study involved interviews with 27 young individuals based in the UK, about how they managed their LGBTQ identity online. Since Facebook, with its various privacy settings, allows users to control the audience of their content, Duguay's study considered the loopholes that may exist like an event attendance. A young homosexual man, who is not out to his family, checks-in to a pride parade on a Facebook event, which also allows the information to pop up on the newsfeed of his Facebook friends, including family members. His compartmentalized Facebook life seems to have collapsed, as his sexuality is no longer a secret. Duguay found that each participant reacted differently. While some took the collapse positively

and chose to redefine their identity rather than conceal it; others hurriedly tried to hide and delete such revelatory online posts to protect their performances; and even others just engaged in alternate identity performances, like portraying oneself as a supporter, or camouflaging their LGBTQ identity with humor (Duguay, 2016).

Further, in terms of identity performances on Facebook, one of the most interesting developments happened in 2014, when the social networking giant's policy overhaul required users to upload their official or "real" names, one that can be verified by means of official documents like state issued license, passport, etc. There were many people who demanded a boycott of the platform. According to Lingel & Golub (2015), it marked a major gap that exists between the creators' purpose for the technology and the people's imagination of its uses. One of the best representations of this was found among the drag community, who were faced with the problem of being unable to use their favored social networking platform to perform the identity they wanted to. Balancing out the rigid technological requirements to accommodate the complex narratives of gender, as performed by the drag queens, is a tactical task. Most of the participants, in the study, were found to have maintained their Facebook profiles to maintain their fan following, which in turn impacts their economic and social situation, and there on their communal identity.

Cooper & Dzara (2010) also found that the Facebook Groups not only contributes towards networking, knowledge-sharing, but also doubles up as a support group where members can share their concerns. They observed that the Facebook LGBTQ Groups often provides the individuals located in the isolated, rural areas, with their very first network among people who share a similar identity, as themselves. In their research, they underscore how such online communities can encourage links between individual and collective identity, thereby

encouraging LGBTQ identifying individuals to realize their selves and strengthen the group identity. Following from the above explication of the use of online spaces and groups for constructing and managing LGBTQ identity, it was pertinent to understand whether the Facebook Groups privacy settings were an important factor in the group identity construction. Therefore, this research sought to explore the following research question:

**RQ4.** To what extent does the importance of privacy settings for participants affect their perception of Group Identity?

**Queer Counterpublic and Social Media.** Social media is arguably a public space, much like offline spaces, where people get together and engage in communication. Arguably, the Internet has further provided the possibility for the subaltern counterpublics, as defined by Fraser (1992), who are excluded from the dominant publics in the public sphere, to voice their concerns more freely. But, who is the public and how does it come to be formed? The basic understanding is that people as a whole form the idea of the public. Social theorist Michael Warner (2002) adds to that definition and suggests that the public can also be defined as a crowd gathered for a particular event such as a concert, and in a third sense it can be people tied together in relation to some particular text or discourse they have in common. Warner defined the “public” as one that is “self-organized” and exists “by virtue of being addressed.” In other words, a public is formed independent of any framework, it is self-creating and self-organized. A text, such as this dissertation, connects its readers who in turn form the public for this research by being the audience. Even the slightest sliver of attention to the research will constitute the person as a part of the public.

In relation to the public, Warner also elucidates his concept of the counterpublic as a group of people who are formed through a conflictual relation to the dominant public, similar to

Fraser's ideation of the subaltern counterpublic (1992). They are not simply a subset, but rather formed due to the exclusions in the dominant publics or because they are different than the socio-cultural norms. Warner adds that the counterpublic also comes into being by virtue of being addressed and paying attention to the counterpublic discourse. Following from this theorization of the counterpublic, and against the backdrop of considering the social media as a public sphere, the queer community in India form a counterpublic due to their non-normative characteristics.

A subordinate to the mainstream Indian society, the LGBTQ community has had a conflicted relation with the public. Further, they were socially marked as different from the dominant public as they engaged and paid attention to the counterpublic discourse, such as the debates revolving around IPC Section 377, membership in spaces that comprised of LGBTQ individuals and supporters, and other evident markings like rallying in the pride parades across the country or engaging in visible activism for LGBTQ rights in the country.

According to Warner, his ideation of the public was "derived from the broadcast modes of publication, which doesn't have any closed circle of community discussion at all" (Kreisler, 2018). He stressed the asymmetry of the broadcast model where the one to many communication channels leads to larger distribution and lesser feedback. As noted by Warner in his 2018 interview with Kreisler, social media was still at a very nascent stage at the time of his conception of the public and counterpublic, however he feared that the Internet had a profound effect on how the public is formed. The existence of the single ideal public is far from possible in the digital world due to the increased fragmentation and multiple channels of communication as supported by the Internet.

Nevertheless, researchers have argued that the online space is providing the ideal public sphere as opposed to physical offline spaces, as it allows for a more democratic approach to

public issues (McLean, 2014). The multiple voices allow for different viewpoints to be heard and also publicly challenged, as has been evidenced in the case of #MeToo movement since 2017. Research on digital spaces and the queer counterpublic stresses the possibilities of open and equal participation by all those who have access to the digital space, such as McLean's (2014) research on the Johannesburg Pride South Africa. Renninger (2015) introduces networked counterpublics while exploring counterpublic communication affordances of Tumblr and comparing it to the Asexuality Visibility Education Network website. Jenzen (2017) meanwhile finds in her research that the trans youth in the UK are developing meaningful understanding about their own identity through diverse online culture and virtual counterpublics.

The LGBTQ community is defined by the differentiation made between it and the heteronormative public; it is by definition of heterosexuality and gender binary that the other gender and sexual identities exist. In that sense, within the space of the LGBTQ counterpublic, the members can be free about their identities, however such conversations and discourse are limited within a certain section or "protected venues." Members becoming a part of the counterpublic may be aware of the risk of being identified as a member of the counterpublic, particularly as the queer counterpublic gradually moves to spaces where they can reach more of the public who will be interested in their discourse. As Warner explained – "The subordinate status of a counterpublic does not simply reflect identities formed elsewhere; participation in such a public is one of the ways by which its members' identities are formed and transformed."

Social media spaces for the queer community can be argued to be the "protected venues" within which the counterpublic of the LGBTQ community are participating in the discourse of queer sexuality and gender identity. By Warner's explication, participation defines membership, and it is by expressing interest, paying attention or knowing about the counterpublic that one

becomes a part of the counterpublic. As a collective, this identity as the counterpublic contributes to the political identity of the LGBTQ community and the ongoing global social movement for queer rights.

### **Being LGBTQ on Social Media in India**

When Indian crown prince Manvendra Singh Gohil came out in the open about his homosexuality in 2006, very few in his immediate circle were appreciative of it. In his social role, as the possible future king of Rajpipla, in Gujarat, it was unacceptable to step outside the normative procreative structure of sexuality in the society. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey in 2007, the world's first openly gay prince talked about his "coming out" as a homosexual, and despite being conscious of his attraction towards the same-sex, he reasoned that his lack of knowledge and ability to gather any information about sexuality led him to marry a woman at one point, in the hopes of "become(ing) a heterosexual" (Dixit, 2016; Pressly, 2007; Oprah Winfrey Network, 2015).

Today, Prince Manvendra is one of the most popular advocates for equal rights, and has been spearheading The Lakshya Trust, an organization addressing the various needs of LGBTQ identifying individuals, in the state of Gujarat. He has interestingly also been a part of the International Arranged Marriage Bureau for Gays and Lesbians, along with businessman Benhur Samson, and they are making use of the various communication technologies to bring together their clients (International Marriage Bureau for Gays & Lesbians, 2015). Combining the concept of the conventional arranged marriage with the unconventional or non-normative sexual identity, is perhaps one of the novelties of this system. Mainly targeted at the Indian-American and Indian homosexual population, this is also an example of the impacts that Internet has had on the LGBTQ population in the country (Jaiswal, 2016; Sharma, 2016).

Most of the literature on the Indian LGBTQ population has focused upon the ground reality of the social, economic, political, emotional, psychological, and legal issues for the community. Looking back into the historical archives, researchers have traced down how India was not always as closeted about gender and sexuality, as today (Srivastava, 2004). Records of non-normative sexual acts can be traced back up till the advent of colonialism. In the post-colonial India there were significant changes in how sexuality and alternate genders were dealt with (Arondekar, 2005). This is where Section 377 comes in, by criminalizing non-procreative sexual acts, and leads to the build-up of a complex, intolerant, and somewhat ignorant nature of the Indian society (Bhan, 2005; Bhaskaran, 2002; Sharma & Das, 2011). Research has also shown that religion and politics are often used as aggravators in such situations, as they propagate an idea of intolerance by motivating religious or political groups towards anti-queer attitudes (Bachetta, 1999), and in the face of a lack of education or misguided information dispersal, religion and politics can reinforce the hegemonic gender and sexuality structure (Puri, 1999). Studies have also focused on specific sections of the LGBTQ communities like transgender people or hijra identity (Reddy, 2005), lesbians and their suppressed voices (Dave, 2012; Fernandez & Gomathy, 2005; Sharma M. , 2007), and class differences within the queer community (Gupta, 2005). However, there are very few studies that are researching into queer identity on social media platforms in India.

Perhaps one of the starting points for any researcher interested in the LGBTQ population in India, and how Internet communication has impacted the community, will be Parmesh Shahani's book "Gay Bombay" (2008). It situates the story of Gay Bombay, an online-offline community that revolves around a website, and involves newsgroup and physical get-togethers, within the socio-cultural map of India's most metropolitan and busiest city – Mumbai. The book

manages to provide an understanding into how globalization had an impact on the Indian LGBTQ population. Shahani writes about the 1990's, when there was little to no visibility of the LGBTQ community, and most individuals operated underground. But when the Indian economy was opened up to the world, it also brought along informational benefits for the community: members were exposed to an increased amount of LGBTQ stories by the mainstream media. The Internet's arrival further drove the community into a wealth of information about gender and sexuality, something that was not easily available. To recognize oneself as non-normative, the LGBTQ people had to depend on individual experiences, as was in the case of Prince Manvendra.

Roy (2003) further adds to Shahani's story by sharing how the road map towards an online web of South Asian queer group was initiated in the US by two friends in 1993, who created an email list called the *Khush* list (Khush is a literal translation of the term gay, in the sense of happiness). With the Internet becoming more accessible, email lists gave way to web groups on sites like Yahoo!. Today there are several South Asian LGBTQ support organizations located around the world like Trikone in Austin (USA), SALGA in New York (USA), Humsafar Trust in Mumbai (India), who have their own websites. However, the prevalence of such websites only started in the 2000s.

Further studies conducted into the use of Internet by LGBTQ identifying Indians have stressed the adoption of email lists, message boards, and weblogs to communicate with each other since the advent of the web (Krishna, 2010; Mitra, 2010; Mitra & Gajjala, 2008). However, few studies seem to have focused upon the possible use of popular social networking platforms such as Facebook, in an Indian context. Despite the digital divide, India has the highest number of Facebook users worldwide. Observably, several LGBTQ oriented Facebook Groups have also

emerged in India (Orinam, n.d.). This research has conducted an in-depth exploration of a sample of such Facebook Groups used by the LGBTQ community in India to develop an understanding into its role for identity construction. It seeks to find answers to the following research questions through the two phases of the study:

**RQ5a.** How does the social intolerance affect the Indian LGBTQ community's participation on the Facebook Groups?

**RQ5b.** How does social intolerance affect the Group Identity of the participant members of the Facebook Groups?

## **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, stress is laid upon understanding queer identity, particularly with reference to India, and the documented use of social media by LGBTQ identifying individuals. Drawing upon the previous chapters' extensive discussion into identity formation, and the research conducted into queer identity, it has been observed that stepping outside the normative boundaries set by the society comes with retaliation in the form of punishments – legal, social, and moral. For an individual to choose to be non-normative comes at a steep price (Khan F. A., 2014; Weaver, 2013). And this fear of being punished for identifying outside the norms is the most detrimental factor in queer identity formation, and discourages many individuals from coming out, particularly in social contexts like that of India (Afzal, 2005; Boyce, 2006).

However, with increased conversation and debate flowing about gender and sexuality, stress being laid upon scientific explanations about the wide spectrum of possibilities, and a nudge to redefine the social reality, the movement is no longer underground. The non-virtual world's unacceptance of the diversity, has led more and more individuals to resort to the more

accommodative virtual world (Rosenmann & Safir, 2006): network with similarly identifying individuals (Cooper & Dzara, 2010), compartmentalize identities to maintain peace with the intolerant society (Duguay, 2016), and at the same time build up a level of confidence in the chosen and desired identity. The social media space comes with advantages and disadvantages, but in a society like India, where information outlets are limited, let alone physical support in every city and state, such Facebook Groups meant for LGBTQ can provide a possible avenue to the Indian queer counterpublic to learn and re-learn about gender and sexuality.

## **Chapter 5: Methodology**

This mixed methods study involved collecting in-depth interview data with active LGBTQ members present on various Facebook Groups at the time of study, detailed textual data collected from the LGBTQ Facebook Groups, and subsequently conducting an online survey with LGBTQ individuals, who are members of such support Facebook Groups. For a constructive overview, this chapter outlining the research methodology, has been divided into various sections such as the field of study, proposed methods for the study, and the two phases of the study.

### **The Field of Study**

Facebook Groups is a popular feature available to every user. Replicating the social group or gathering of people outside the virtual world, Facebook allows users from around the world to get together based on shared interest and identity (Abram, 2013; Storer-Church, 2015; Suwaidi, 2013). It enables an individual to set up separate groups for their social circles, like family, friends, colleagues, bowling buddies, and thereon communicate, discuss, plan, and collaborate with a desired set of people at a given point of time (Facebook, 2019; Petronzio, 2013). These shared interests can also range from rallying for humanitarian causes like Black Lives Matter in recent years, to trying to break the records of having over millions of users since Facebook launched the feature in 2004 (The 25 Facebook Groups with Over 1 Million Members, 2009; How do I create a group?, 2017). The basic aim of the virtual groups on the social networking platform is to encourage collaboration among people, bring them together in the same virtual space, and lend them a sense of privacy (Kirkpatrick, 2010).

Users can start a new group by clicking on the “create new group” from the profile’s side menu showing “Groups” or following the “▼” in the top right corner of one’s Facebook profile or

home page (How do I create a group?, 2017). Giving it a name, adding members and most importantly selecting the privacy settings are some of the first steps taken for building this shared space, as discussed in Chapter 2. Facebook added the feature of Groups in 2004, however the groups have evolved and continuously changed over the past decade as visualized in Figure 1 (Knibbs, 2014; Loomer, 2012; Suchanek, 2014; Tramz, 2014).

In this study, one of the most significant characteristics of Facebook Groups is the privacy settings. The Groups have three types of privacy settings – *open*, *closed* and *secret*. The *admin* (short for administrator), who may initiate the Group or is elected as an administrator through an informal process by past administrators, has a significant amount of control over the online community. The admin controls who can post on the Group, what posts are kept and removed, add or delete members, and control members who may harm the group's purpose or interest by removing them from the Group (What are the privacy settings for groups?, 2019; Ferguson, 2014; Petronzio, 2013).

Following from the detailed discussion about the Facebook Groups privacy settings in Chapter 2, in short, an open Facebook Group does not have any security feature, while the closed and secret groups, have a certain level of security. The only difference among the latter two lies in their accessibility and visibility, as a closed group can be searched and seen by the public, but a secret group is an invite-only and therefore anonymous (What are the privacy settings for groups?, 2019; Ferguson, 2014; Petronzio, 2013).

Understanding the various processes involved in creating and maintaining a Facebook Group is relevant to conducting this research, as the Facebook Group is the primary area of study. Further, the lack of social and legal acceptance for the LGBTQ community in India makes the Groups endearing to many of the individuals, as suggested by Rosenmann & Safir (2006).

The limited technological access to the Internet also suggests that the conversation on a platform like Facebook Group is limited to a privileged section of the community, who observably maintain a secret or closed setting for their groups. These groups are also generally wary of strangers and anti-LGBTQ activists, who join under the guise of a new member. Therefore, it was pertinent to gain the trust of the community members on the various Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ community in India. One of the best methods was by voicing one's support for the community, and visibly standing by and identifying with them, and eventually being granted access into the online community (DeBlaere, Brewster, Sarkees, & Moradi, 2010; Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, & Cui, 2009; Kendall, 2009).

### **Research Methodology**

This research endeavored to answer the basic question of what use an online platform like Facebook Group can hold for a minority community like the LGBTQ in India. To investigate the relationship between social media, LGBTQ community, and the individual, it was necessary to explore the subjective meaning attached by individuals to such online communities. It was also important to find out what factors possibly motivate an individual to be a part of such online communities. Following from the hypotheses and research questions stated in this dissertation, it was determined that a sequential exploratory mixed methods approach can be an efficient process of bringing about in-depth data (Brennen, 2013; Hesse-Biber, 2010; Hesse-Biber, Rodriguez, & Frost, 2015). Mixed methods research today, is a sought-after practice in international development areas such as among the global development organizations, who are not just interested in numbers that show an impact, but are also curious about qualitative assessments that can aid in practical improvements (Hulme, 2000; Mertens, Bledsoe, Sullivan, & Wilson, 2016).

While a quantitative research attempts to measure, analyze and explain causal relationships, qualitative research allows for a flexible approach to explore a given field and community (Babbie, 2012; Brennen, 2013; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Mixed methods, which can be a combination of both qualitative and quantitative research, brings together a wide spectrum of data that can provide a more in-depth perspective into the desired area of study, and thereby better research results (Hesse-Biber, 2010; Mertens, 2007). A sequential exploratory mixed methods design refers to a study that first employs qualitative method(s) to generate theoretical data or constructs. The quantitative method then plays an auxiliary or secondary part, used to test out the ideas from the qualitative component on a representative population for the study (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Hesse-Biber, Rodriguez, & Frost, 2015).

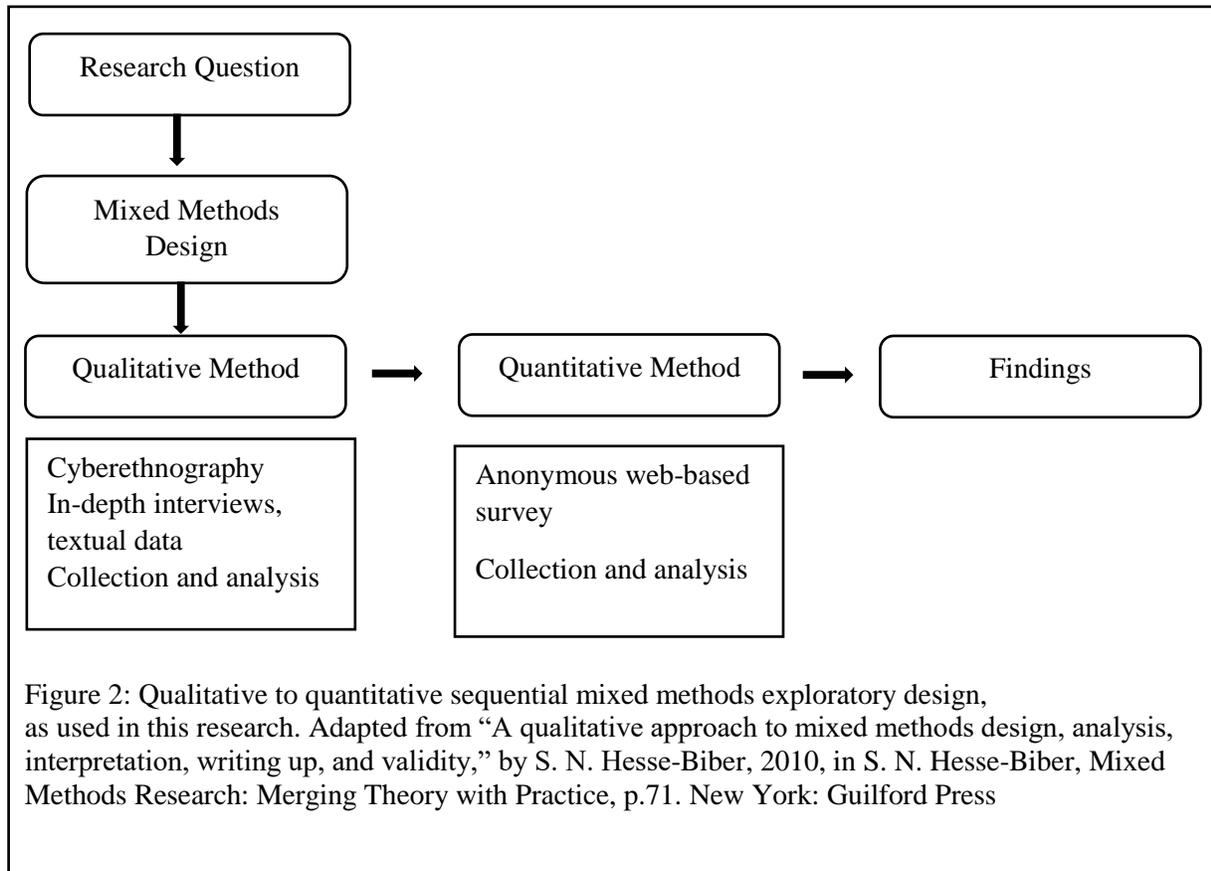
At the time of the study, there were no recorded research that explored the use of Facebook Groups by the LGBTQ community in India. This dissertation therefore provided a scope to explore an untouched area and required the researcher to be cognizant of the problems that may arise during the research, thereby necessitating the use of mixed methods. The LGBTQ community's sensitive status in the country suggested that many individuals may have been uncomfortable with a qualitative, personal, and in-depth interview, even if their identity was kept anonymous and confidential. A qualitative inquiry is also time-consuming, but nevertheless provides rich, in-depth, exploratory data (Brennen, 2013). In such instances, where privacy and confidentiality are potential concerns, an anonymous survey can offer a relatively trustworthy method for collecting large amount of data from the LGBTQ participants, where the researcher has no point of contact with the participants. However, a survey comes with the limitation of generalizing and standardizing experiences, inflexibility, and artificiality, as there is no control

over whether the participant is answering honestly, or just clicking what they consider will be a preferable answer (Babbie, 2012). Combining the two methods however helped deliver both the rich experiential data acquired via qualitative method, and large, descriptive data through quantitative analysis. Further, as suggested by Hesse-Biber, Rodriguez, & Frost (2015), the secondary quantitative component could be used to develop a better understanding of the qualitative data, and/or test whether the qualitative data and the resulting theory is generalizable to a larger population.

The qualitative portion of the research, termed as phase one, was conducted between March and November 2015. It involved a cyberethnography which led to a more immersive involvement and richer data through participant observation, interviews, and textual analysis of the content produced on the Facebook Groups (Rybas & Gajjala, 2007). As Rybas and Gajjala (2007) observe that the main concern with such studies which aim to look at the mediated identities on the Internet is not just interpreting the text produced but also looking into the context within which the texts are produced. Cyberethnography, complete with in-depth interviews with LGBTQ members of Facebook Groups and textual data, has enabled the researcher to gain an understanding into the participants' lives, thoughts and interests, and give the much needed social context within which to make sense of the Facebook Groups (Babbie, 2012; Brennen, 2013; Kvale, 1996; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

The collection and analysis of the qualitative data gave rise to certain thematic patterns and theoretical constructs in the study. Based upon the qualitative data analysis, a survey instrument was prepared to gain a more descriptive data representative of the concerned population (Babbie, 2012) and test out the ideas generated from the qualitative part (Hesse-Biber, 2010). Studies suggest that it is typically helpful to develop research instruments in

consultation with the LGBTQ community members and/or along the recommendations given by them (DeBlare et al., 2010). Following from the above explication, the study was broken down into two phases (see Figure 2), and the second phase of the research was spread out over a period of eight to nine months, ending with the writing of the dissertation.



### Qualitative Inquiry on the Internet

The Internet is one of the predominant media spaces for research over the past two decades, and has been treated differently by various researchers – as a venue or space, social artifact, parallel reality, pocket universes within the web, cyberculture, etc. (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Rybas & Gajjala, 2007). In communication and media research, among the qualitative methods employed, the most popular so far has been cyberethnography or virtual ethnography

referring to the adaptation of ethnographic methods to the Internet, and interviews over synchronous communications forms like relay chats or video chats (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

The ethical considerations in case of the Internet based research is one of the major concerns for various scholars (Elm, 2009; Eysenbach & Till, 2001; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Zimmer, 2010). Given the lack of universal guidelines about how to navigate around privacy issues and also the difficulty in gaining informed consent from users, particularly unidentifiable ones, questions have been raised about the methods employed for an Internet based research. The Association of Internet Researchers formed in the 1990s devised ethical guidelines according to which the Internet research without an informed consent can only be conducted under the circumstances that first it is a public environment; for example – Wikipedia, available to every Internet user for viewing purposes. The second criteria was the data to be collected and studied is not sensitive in nature (Elm, 2009; Ess & AoIR, 2002). In the absence of such circumstances, gaining informed consent from the userbase of the given venue of study on the Internet is mandatory.

However, as Elm (2009) observes in her article, it brings up the factor of defining the public and the private and all that lies in between. If treated as a continuum, and not a dichotomy, Elm (2009) notes that there can be the public venue, where there are no members and the venue gives open access to everyone, like Wikipedia and Quora. In between the public and private are the semi-public, which is open access but requires membership, and the semi-private that is only available to users who fulfil certain pre-requisites for joining the online space. The private is a closed and hidden network, and members are chosen or invited. However, the definition of private and public is also problematic from individual standpoints as different Internet users may perceive the concept differently. A user who is a member of a closed

Facebook group comprising of just 50 LGBTQ people may consider it to be a public or semi-public environment, while for another member who is also a part of the same group it may be an extremely private and intimate environment. In order to manage that issue Elm (2009) suggests comparing the online venue with a similar offline site and understanding how the two compare and what will be the modus operandi in case of such a group outside the Internet.

Perhaps one of the best examples when it comes to privacy and online research ethics is the T3 case where in 2008, Lewis, Kaufman, Gonzalez, Wimmer & Christakis published their article “Tastes, ties, and time: A new social network dataset using Facebook.com” and also released a dataset consisting of the 1,700 social networking profiles they had gathered for the purposes of their research (Parry, 2011). What followed were academics’ critical assessments and in particular Zimmer’s (2010) study that exhibited that the data that Lewis et al. had claimed to be anonymous could be easily traced back to the Harvard College’s Class of 2009, due to some of the identity markers. It is because of such cases where researchers like Lewis et al. (2008) differ on the meaning of privacy, and may consider private profiles of students as “public” due to their sheer presence on a social networking site, that it is necessary to problematize the concept of public and private, and be very clear about the definitions used to gain consent (Elm, 2009). These ethical concerns have also led to stricter rules and regulations set by the Institutional Review Boards for conducting Internet based research. For the purposes of this research, Facebook Groups with secret or closed privacy settings have been considered as “private” spaces, as described by Elm (2009).

A third concern voiced by scholars has been that about the power dynamics (Elm, 2009; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). As with any field research – ethnography, interviews – the researcher has had to be aware of their own positionality with reference to the field and participants and

remain cognizant of their privilege in terms of education, economic and social status, gender and other axes of social differences that can play a role in the interaction that takes place on the field. Further, it is the researcher who has the power to carve the story of the participants, and that can often have an impact on the communication and relationship between the researcher and researched (Alcoff, 1991; Haraway, 1988).

**Cyberethnography.** Ethnography, according to Creswell (2007), can be explained as the study of a cultural group and observing the shared patterns, which eventually culminates into what Maanen (1988) states as “written representations of culture.” Devised as a method to study cultures by observing a group of people in their native environment and describing the various aspects, ethnography strives towards developing an understanding of them (Rybas & Gajjala, 2007). Following from that, scholars like Garcia et al. (2009), have noted that there is little ethnographic research conducted into computer-mediated communication environments, and researchers rather prefer to step out into the offline world for gathering data about the online reality. Nevertheless, cyberethnography has since been used in studying online communities like that of transvloggers on YouTube (Figa, 2016), online support groups (Lee M. , 2017), communities relating to online sperm donors (Moore & Grady, 2014). To understand the culture of Internet users and the various subcultures that have sprung up on the world wide web, researchers encourage a more naturalistic approach where in the participants are observed in their natural online environment (Garcia et al., 2009; Hallett & Barber, 2014; Hine, 2000).

According to Garcia et al. (2009) it is pertinent to note that the virtual reality is not separate from the social reality, but rather a part of it. In the field, the researcher has to treat the virtual groups being studied like any other non-Internet based social group, where there would be community norms and expectations. It is also important to notice the settings of the virtual space

being studied; for example, if the users only maintain an online relation as opposed to networks where users also have an offline connect. Another point to consider is the researcher's role, wherein if the researcher proposes to be a part of the virtual space through the Internet or physically among the community members, depending on the nature of the field, or both (Garcia et al., 2009; Hine, 2000).

Given the nature of the Internet, when conducting cyberethnography a number of significant factors and potential problems as outlined by Garcia et al., (2009) and Hine (2000) had to be considered by the researcher. Such as, since the field was the virtual space, the researcher was unable to observe the individual users physical behavior but only that which they performed online. Secondly, field notes made about the physical settings, the participants, and their interviews during an ethnography, were replaced by electronic collection of data in the online space. Thirdly, most of the analysis was dependent on interpretation of the textual or visual data rather than the physical behavior of people. Finally, the online space came with not just text based or image based data, but also contained interactive characteristics which had to be noted.

Looking particularly into the aspect of conducting cyberethnography on social networking sites, Murthy (2008) notes that it comes with the advantages of being able to observe not only the networks of people, but also has a plethora of information about various marginal social movements or groups just a click away and leads to collection of valuable data. However, there is a considerable divide between the haves and have-nots when it comes to assessing any online research, particularly marginalized groups. There are also problems of resistance, privacy and ethical concerns (Murthy, 2008).

**In-depth Interviews.** Most online interviews are conducted through asynchronous text-based modes like emails or discussion boards, and there are also interviews which are conducted on a synchronous medium such as instant messages or relay chats (Garcia et al., 2009; Kendall, 2009; Rybas & Gajjala, 2007). Online interviews are affordable, convenient, self-transcribing, and accommodative of participants/researchers who do not like face-to-face interactions (Davis, Bolding, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2013; Kazmer & Xie, 2008; Murthy, 2008). However, one of the problems of interviews conducted over text-based messages is that it can be seen as a textual performance with edited responses from both the ends - the researcher and the participant (Davis et al., 2013; Kazmer & Xie, 2008). In this study, it was important to look beyond the edited responses and gather deeper meaning about the observations made through the cyberethnography. Therefore, as noted by Garcia et al. (2009) it required a more in-depth offline interview rather than an online interview.

The geographical distance between the participants and the researcher made it difficult for an in-person, face-to-face interview. It was further reasoned that since many of the LGBTQ identifying participants from India may be unwilling to identify themselves, the researcher would conduct offline interviews over phone calls. The possibility of a video chat was not completely ruled out as it could allow the researcher to observe the participant's behavior during the conversation. As observed in case of telephone-based interviews and personal face-to-face interviews, when the participants are able to observe the researcher and their non-verbal cues, it helps them to personalize and often increases the comfort level in sharing information, as opposed to talking to a stranger over the phone (Babbie, 2012; Brennen, 2013; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Kazmer & Xie, 2008). Therefore, the participants in the first phase of this study were given the choice of a telephone-based interview or a video chat. Giving people the option of

choosing the mode of interview could also increase the chances of participation (Kazmer & Xie, 2008). The advantage of conducting in-depth offline interviews for this study has been the first-person accounts about being members of such LGBTQ Facebook Groups, their concerns at an individual and community level, and their perspectives on possible identity-construction and social movement generated through such virtual communities.

### **Phase One**

This research has been broken down into two parts following in the steps as outlined for sequential mixed methods research (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Hesse-Biber, 2010). In the first phase, the in-depth interviews and the subsequent analysis of the textual data, along with the observations made about the contexts that produce the interactions, the forms of interactions – emoticons, image based, text based, language, color – has provided with rich data about the online community being studied. It has also allowed for an in-depth analysis of the Facebook Groups’ content and the visible engagement, the kind of engagement (likes, dislikes, comments, shares, etc.), and the future effects of such engagement that’s shared on the Groups. Over the period of the study, it has shown how the Groups’ content may change over time, which can be reflective of the changing social schema for the LGBTQ community in India. The following section breaks down the first phase of the study.

**Entering the Field.** The first step in this research method after formulating the process was seeking the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board’s approval to continue with this human subject research. Given the study has two different phases, and on the advice of IRB at Syracuse University, two separate applications were made – one for the qualitative or cyberethnography portion, and another for the quantitative survey, even though both contributed to the same study. The reason as outlined by the IRB was the vastly different

methodology to be used for studying the same population, where the qualitative method may be more invasive than the anonymous quantitative survey, and thereby requiring two separate applications – expedited and exempt, respectively. The initial IRB application for the first phase of the study was approved on March 9, 2015. The second IRB application was made after the qualitative data were analyzed and the survey instrument was constructed. The IRB approved the study involving the web-based survey on January 12, 2018.

After receiving the IRB approval for the first phase of the study, the researcher began the study by gaining membership in various Facebook Groups meant for the LGBTQ community in India, through Facebook searches using common English terms for the queer movement. The researcher personally held membership in four such Facebook Groups at the time of the study, and a simple search with common terms like “LGBT,” “LGBTQ,” “India,” “gay rights,” led to a few more open and closed groups. At this juncture, it is important to highlight that search with Indian terms for queer gender and sexual identity such as *koti*, *panthi*, *hijra* and, *aravani*, in the English script did not lead to any results for LGBTQ Facebook Groups in India. After gaining access to these groups in the form of membership, the initial rapport was built with the Facebook Group administrators in order to be transparent about the research purposes and secure permission to collect data and observe the groups (Elm, 2009). As opposed to a face-to-face research space where the participants can see and interact with the researcher before determining their decision, in this study the researcher had to be conscious about the anonymous characteristic of an online environment, which led some groups to be more resistant to being studied than others. It was however hoped that with the initial contact developed by the researcher through their real Facebook profile consisting of factual data, providing sufficient information, and the reasons behind conducting this exploratory research, and conversing with

the Facebook Groups, the researcher would eventually gain the trust of most members (Garcia et al., 2009). Such was the case of secret Groups on Facebook, which cannot be found through normal search methods on the site. The researcher gained access to various secret LGBTQ Groups by way of invitation from existing members who first became acquainted with the researcher and arguably trusted her to be invited into the secret, virtual communities. For the purposes of conducting this study, the Groups or Group admins had to provide with formal letters of cooperation that approved the process of participant observation.

**Sampling and Recruitment.** The Facebook Groups were recruited through convenience sampling, based on the researcher's prior rapport with LGBTQ members, and search results on Facebook. In the initial stages, the researcher recruited two highly dense LGBTQ Groups with closed settings for the interviews. The target population for the in-depth interviews were LGBTQ individuals with access to the Internet and who are active members on various Facebook Groups for the queer community in India. The participants for the in-depth interviews had to be above 18 years of age, and identify as LGBTQ individuals, and not supporters or allies. The researcher reached out to the members for a voluntary participation in private and confidential interviews. The target sample for interviews was set at ten to 15 members. Eventually 11 LGBTQ individuals were recruited through the Facebook Groups by means of convenience and snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted (Appendix A) from March 10 to May 27, 2015. The interviews were recorded in an audio format with informed consent of the participants (see Appendix A for consent form). Informed consent here implies providing the participants with a written document detailing the study, its purpose, use of the data being provided by the participant, and the process of anonymizing all the information, by use of pseudonyms and avoiding any other individually identifying detail such as age, location, or place of work.

Participants also had the option to withdraw from the study at any time. All the interviews were conducted over phone, as per the participants' choice. The researcher did not keep any record of the phone numbers to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. Furthermore, each participant was given a pseudonym to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

The sample included 11 self-identified LGBTQ individuals, ranging in age from 21 to 36 years at the time of interviews. The participants' occupations were varied and included, for example, student, lawyer, business analyst, freelance communication designer, activist, human resource manager, and linguist. Since the interviews were conducted over the telephone, it was possible to connect with members located in various cities across the country. Three participants were from Chennai (Tamil Nadu), three participants from New Delhi, two participants from Mumbai (Maharashtra), two from Guwahati (Assam), and one from Kolkata (West Bengal).

Nine of the participants indicated that they were assigned male at birth, and the remaining two participants were assigned female at birth. In their own words, four of the participants described their gender identity as males; one participant identified as a female; one participant identified as a transmale person; one participant shared that they identified as a transgender individual. Three participants said they were gender-fluid, and that they transitioned between either male and female identity. Gender-fluidity is when "gender expression shifts from masculine to feminine" and gender-fluid (genderfluid) identity is generally understood as a term defining non-binary identities in the US (Booker, 2016). In India, this identity term has a similar meaning as was found in a document by The Humsafar Trust, a LGBT rights organization in India, where they cited the term as synonymous to genderqueer identity, and defined it as "a gender identity label often used by people who do not identify with the binary of man/woman; an umbrella term for many gender non-conforming or non-binary identities (e.g., agender, bigender,

genderfluid)” (The Humsafar Trust, 2018). The similarity in meanings and understanding of terms such as gender-fluid can be attributed to the adoption of the western terminologies by various LGBT rights advocacy groups in the country. One participant wrote in their email to the researcher when sharing their intent to participate in the research, that they believe they were both trans and gender-fluid:

I consider myself as Trans as I am not satisfied with my body according to my identity and so I am trying to change it but since I am gender-fluid I am trying to make it as unisex. As a gender-fluid I consider that I have two separate identities of both male and female. I can control these identities as to when which identity has to come in active and passive mode. I am not third gender who think that they are both man and woman. I consider myself as either male or female at a time. As a male I am attracted to female and vice-versa. I can adjust my identity according to the surrounding, type of conversation going on etc etc.[sic] The fem part is very submissive, romantic, emotional and emphatic while male part is dominant, short temper, impatient etc. each have different food and coffee choices even.

Sarah, personal communication, March 12, 2015

In terms of their sexual orientation, four of the participants identified as gay men, one participant identified herself as an asexual lesbian, and one participant identified herself as a heterosexual trans person. One of the participants believed they should be a lesbian but was also confused as they wanted a sex change in the future and thereby felt their attraction to women would be categorized as heterosexual. Among the four gender-fluid identifying participants, two

of the participants explained that they should be identified as heterosexual, as depending on the gender identity they assume they are attracted to the opposite sex at that particular given time.

Two of the participants did not explicitly state their sexuality.

To realize the objective of the study, it was pertinent to observe the closed or secret setting of the various LGBTQ Groups on Facebook. Since the settings also signified privacy, many of the Groups were unwilling to provide the researcher with permissions to conduct the participant observation aspect of the cyberethnography, for fear of violating their members trust. Outlining the basic research questions and purpose of the study, the Group administrators had to be assured that the textual data would not be quoted without due permission of the concerned Group user(s), whose post was being used, and a cross-consultation with the admin body (see Appendix B for the recruitment form). While the closed Groups were easily accessible through online searches, the researcher gained access to various secret Groups through other existing members. The researcher continued recruiting the Groups until at least three Facebook Groups agreed to the study and provided with letters of cooperation, which were duly submitted to the Institutional Review Board. The IRB approved the addition of participant observation to the study on July 31, 2015, following a number of prescribed modifications to the research design, which included announcing to all the members of each Group about the research study, and ensuring that identifiable data from the Groups would not be collected or reported at any point of time. Technically the researcher could collect screenshots, but that method was avoided since it had the possibility of containing identifiable information and could compromise the confidentiality of the Groups. Documentation in the form of screenshots was used minimally. The researcher relied heavily upon daily field notes to refer to various posts, as opposed to physical documentation of all the posts made on the various Groups. Following the IRB

approval, the researcher posted on the three Groups' about the research study and shared a consent form outlining the study, the risks, the gains, and the participants' rights to withdraw from the study, file a disapproval, or record a complaint with either the researcher, the group admin or the faculty advisor. The consent form also stated that the Group content will be documented in the form of screenshots, if required. Furthermore, it was stated that prior to quoting any of the data in the research report, all identifiable information would be removed. After waiting a week when no form of disapprovals of the study were received, the researcher proceeded with the observation and collection of data.

At the time of this study, two of the Groups observed had closed privacy settings, and one was secret. The differences in the settings allowed the researcher to observe the variances, if any, in the Groups' activities. This observation aided in a better assessment of how anonymity and privacy in social media space, provided through closed and secret setting, can contribute to the communication among LGBTQ community and their identity formation. The number of members present in each Group was marked at the beginning and the end of the data collection phase, for a baseline. Each group's details were recorded, and they were assigned pseudonyms for reference throughout the study. The age could not be controlled in case of observing the Facebook Groups as the social networking platform allows anyone above the age of 13 to create a profile. Nevertheless, the researcher made efforts not to collect or analyze textual data that contained posts made by observably underage users.

The participant observation and textual analysis continued simultaneously until new data trends could not be observed. The data for textual analysis of the three Groups' contents were collected for a period of 4 months from August 1, 2015, to November 30, 2015, following the IRB approval. To gain a better and detailed understanding of the field and members, as with any

ethnographic study, the researcher was a participant and interacted with the Groups as and when required ensuring not to cause any disruption or intervention in the Groups' activities. It also helped to develop a rapport with the participating Groups and allowed the researcher the flexibility when recruiting for the second phase of the study involving the web-based survey.

As a part of the observation process, the researcher maintained a log of an average number of posts made each day on each group to assess the popularity and interactivity level within the different Groups. The posts were hand-counted due to the lack of any Facebook setting which provides the information readily. But the attempts at counting the total number of posts for each Group was affected by the lack of a chronological order in the posts made. The Groups' settings sent the most recently interacted with or commented upon posts to the top of the group wall; as a result, older content often came up as a recent conversation. The researcher therefore had to be dependent upon an approximate number of posts.

The study has maintained a level of transparency and all data mentioned in the research have been paraphrased to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of the groups and their members. Quoting directly from the Groups and members' posts had the possibility of revealing the Group identities perchance anyone searches Facebook with the exact phrase as mentioned in this research. Therefore, direct quotes from the Group posts have not been made in this dissertation. Efforts have been made to completely deidentify the data and only provide an analysis of them. Images and figures used as exemplars in the research are generic in nature, implying they may be found in multiple virtual spaces, and therefore pose no threat to the Groups.

**Data Analysis.** It is advisable for a qualitative researcher to alternate between data collection and analysis, or simultaneously conduct the two, as it allows for organizing the data and keeping a track of the “conceptual trajectory of the study” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The grounded theory approach, as conceptualized by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is often considered the most influential model for qualitative coding. The grounded theory method begins with the data and coding it, and then works backward towards a theory as the final outcome. The steps involved in this approach has been adapted by most qualitative researchers for their coding techniques, irrespective of the methods used.

Following in those very steps, the researcher transcribed the interviews first. Next, the qualitative data collected through participant observation on the Facebook Groups such as field notes, logs, and textual data collected in the form of screenshots or images of non-identifiable data was filed together. The software NVivo was then used to analyze, code, and document the data in a single project. The first step towards categorization of the data involves open coding, and essentially allows the researcher to walk through and map out the data in a way that is navigable and meaningful, by drawing upon their own experiences during the study, the literature, and theoretical constructs used (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Saldaña, 2009). Therefore, the codes can be based on pre-coded categories like gender, or theoretical constructs like social identity, or personal experiences of the field. The open coding leads to the initial categories into which the data is sorted. A qualitative research can have hundreds of categories in the initial stages of coding. In the present study, the open codes were first sorted into categories, and eventually a codebook was developed outlining what each category means, documenting the process of coding, and how to apply the codes for future data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Once all the data was coded, following in the suggestions of Lindlof & Taylor (2002), the data was

integrated. The process of integration involved axial coding, which refers to codes that link together various categories, and thereon result in producing a broader category or a theme, which encompasses various other categories. Following the process of integration, the researcher engaged in dimensionalization or bringing out the “key variations” among the themes and broad categories for further analysis. NVivo was used to build a concept map to help the researcher navigate the various categories and the emerging themes. Once the data set was theoretically saturated, implying additional data was adding nothing new to the study, then the data analysis was completed by writing about the findings in Chapter 6.

## **Phase Two**

The second phase of the study involved administering anonymous web-based surveys to the Facebook Group members. The survey instrument was built to test the findings generated from the qualitative method of cyberethnography. The survey also included items on demographic and identity measures. The respondents had to satisfy the criteria of first being an Indian, residing in India at the time of the study, identify as queer or LGBTQ, above the age of 18 years, and users of Facebook Groups that are meant for the queer community in India.

The anonymous web-based survey was administered through the Syracuse University Qualtrics survey software, an online tool that allows the researcher to set up their own survey instrument and disseminate to the target population. The researcher took appropriate steps to ensure that the responses from the survey could not be linked back to the participating members. Qualtrics software generally collects IP addresses, and other easily available personal information of the participants. However, the researcher turned off the collection of all such personal information, and in so doing anonymized the responses, and protected the privacy of the participants as far as technically possible (Qualtrics, 2017). Once the respondents completed the

survey, the data were stored in the online database of Qualtrics, accessible by a password protected account of the researcher. The raw survey reports were then exported to the statistical analysis software of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Individual respondents were the unit of analysis.

**Pilot Survey.** Following the IRB approval for the survey on January 12, 2018, the researcher used purposive sampling and approached various acquaintances made during the first phase of the study (cyberethnography) to participate in a pilot survey. There was a total of 11 respondents. The participants were requested to suggest modifications, identify any problematic terms or language, and provide their overall opinion on the survey's appropriateness for the LGBTQ community in India (Babbie, 2012). Asking for feedback from the participants allowed for the community to be involved in the construction of the research instrument as advised by DeBlaere et al. (2010). One of the suggestions was to consider administering the survey in some of the Indian languages. The researcher translated the survey into the Indian languages of Hindi and Bengali. A second suggestion was to include "third sex" as an option on the item asking about participants' official sex according to their birth certificates: in 2014 the Supreme Court of India officially recognized the transgender individuals' rights to identify outside the gender binary and thereby the third sex or third gender category was included. Some other changes included: providing a clear definition for Facebook Groups, include items to describe participant location (urban or rural), include an item to assess popularity of Facebook Lite.

During the pilot survey, the possibility of providing an incentive to the survey participants was also tested. Initially, it was considered that providing a "pay it forward" incentive may attract greater participation from the Group members. In the pay it forward format, a list of LGBTQ support organizations in India were shortlisted, and for each individual

participation a designated amount was proposed as a donation to the organization. At the end of the survey, the amount multiplied by the total survey participants would have been donated to the organization that received maximum votes. But the pilot survey participants pointed out that any large organization on the list had the potential to corral a large number of participants to secure the donation. Therefore, many of the members of smaller organizations may withdraw from this survey participation. The pay it forward format also posed the risk of skewing the survey data. Choosing any one organization may have alienated participants. A review of survey research and the use of incentives showed that pay it forward or donations to social causes or charities is not very effective (Gendall & Healey, 2010). In India, a medical study used Amazon MTurk and successfully gained data from 772 respondents by providing a personal monetary incentive (USD 0.02) (Chunara, et al., 2012). In an analysis of 2000 studies published in 26 refereed journals, the researchers found that majority of the papers that used surveys in India did not mention the use of an incentive (Krishnan & Poulouse, 2016). The study suggested the best way to increase response rate was to personalize or conduct a direct face-to-face data collection.

Following from the suggestions made by the pilot survey participants and information gathered through literature review, the final survey participants were provided an *optional* personal incentive. At the end of the survey, the participants were given the choice of opting for the monetary incentive of INR 100 (USD 1.41), which would be provided in the form of an Amazon India gift card. The respondents were informed that if they chose to opt for the incentive they would have to share an email address in a separate survey, and their identity could be compromised as they would be leaving the anonymous web-based survey site. Respondents who chose not to receive the incentive were at no risk of identity compromises, as far as could be

controlled by the researcher. The changes to the survey were submitted to the IRB for review and it was approved on April 24, 2018.

**Sample and Data Collection.** After acquiring approval from the IRB, the researcher recruited participants using convenience and snowball sampling. The IRB required prior approval from the Group administrators for the researcher to make a recruitment post: a total of five Groups provided their signed letters of cooperation. The Facebook Groups' members were requested for their voluntary participation in the anonymous web-based survey. The recruitment post for volunteers was made on the five Facebook Groups that provided approval and the members were encouraged to share the survey on other Groups that they had access to. The Facebook post contained a brief description of the study, how to switch between the three languages, and a link to the survey (see Appendix C). Following all requisite IRB procedures, the participants were alerted to the possibility of answering questions that may be personal in nature and require a more private setting to participate. The respondents were further advised about risks such as data breach. The participants well-being and protection is of utmost importance and at the core of this research. Further, the informed consent form assured the participants about the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw from the study at any given point before the publication of this research (see Appendix C).

Due to the nature of the study, as aforementioned, the survey method was a reasonable choice to gain a better understanding and exploration of the research purpose, and validate the findings generated from the qualitative analysis (Hesse-Biber, 2010). Using non-probability sampling methods runs the risk of being unable to generalize the research findings to a larger population, however it is hoped that this research overall would provide with an in-depth understanding of the use of Facebook Groups by LGBTQ members in India.

The survey was first uploaded on the Groups on April 25, 2018 and it remained open for a total of 56 days. The almost two-month period hopefully mitigated the loss of any potential respondents, who may have been irregular or undecided as compared to their fellow members on the Facebook Groups. A total of 208 individuals participated in the survey. After accounting for participants who did not pass the screening items, responded that they did not know about Facebook Groups, did not complete more than 50% of the survey, and provided invalid responses such as participants who clicked on the first choice for every item, the total number of valid responses were 134.

**Survey Measures.** Some of the basic measures that were used in the survey questionnaire are expanded upon in this section and the complete questionnaire can be reviewed in Appendix C. Many of the items that were positioned to ask about sensitive or personal information had the option for “prefer not to answer,” allowing the respondents to opt out of any question they were not comfortable with. The survey also provided the option to withdraw completely, irrespective of whether it was finished or not.

1. *Screening items:* Even though the Facebook Groups being approached for the study were meant for the Indian LGBTQ community, it was important to have some screening items to ensure that people who do not qualify are not participating in the study.
  - a. Age eligibility: This was to ensure that no respondent below the age of 18 participated in the survey.
  - b. Indian citizenship: A “yes/no” item, if the respondent answered “no,” then they were automatically exited from the survey.

- c. LGBTQ identity: If the respondent answered “yes” to the citizenship item, the next criteria was whether they identified as LGBTQ. Again a “yes/no” item, this was to ensure anyone who didn’t identify was automatically exited.
  - d. Indian residence: Since many of the members on such Groups may respond yes to all above three items, but were no longer permanently residing in the country, it was pertinent to ensure they did not continue with the survey. This survey was meant for only those LGBTQ identifying individuals, who are also living their daily lives in India. The socio-cultural context for Indian LGBTQ community residing outside the country is often vastly different and can alter the study of the effects.
2. *Demographic measures:* Variables such as age, education, biological sex, gender identity, self-identified sexual orientation, gender expression, was measured.
- a. Age: This was measured as an interval variable, with a minimum of 18 years, and maximum of 68 years and above.
  - b. Education: Since the education system in India is quite different from that in the US, categories were adapted from Kuppuswamy’s (1981) widely used instrument for measuring socio-economic status in India. A categorical variable, this measure included options ranging between “Doctoral degree and above” to “just literate but no schooling.” While both in the US and in India, formal education system for a child begins at the age of six and comprises of 12 grades, there are some significant differences at the school level. Unlike the US, the Indian education system is broken down differently. The primary school certificate in India refers to completion of grades one to four, middle

school certificate refers to completion of grades five to eight, and high school is grade nine to 12. During high school, Indian students must complete two major certifications. After the 10th grade Indian students are expected to appear for a secondary examination (Madhyamik). Following successful completion of the secondary examination, the students can continue to grade 11 and 12, and at the end appear for the Higher Secondary Examination (Uchya Madhyamik). For students, unable to pursue grade 11 and 12, they can complete a pre-university course also called an intermediate course or post high school diploma, that allows them to continue to higher studies.

Similar to the US, the Indian students can also pursue higher education at colleges and universities after the completion of their grade 12 or an intermediate course. They can pursue undergraduate courses which vary from three to four years depending upon specializations, and there on post-graduate degrees for two years, or professional degrees, such as medical or law, or doctoral studies. The only difference from the US would be in the factor that in India undergraduate studies are referred to as graduate studies (BA, BSc), and Master level studies or graduate studies are instead called post-graduate studies (MA, MSc).

- c. Biological sex: Measured on a nominal scale, the options included “male,” “female,” and “third sex.”
- d. Gender identity: Defined as the gender that participants identify themselves as. This nominal variable was measured with options such as “female,” “male,” “gender-queer person,” and “transgender person.” Following in the

recommendations set out by Federal Interagency Working Group on Improving Measurement of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Federal Surveys (2016), the items regarding gender and sexual identity all had contingency items attached to them inquiring into the options of “don’t know” and “you mean something else.” This allowed the respondents to clarify if they were unable to understand the question and help the researcher to know that the item was problematic. When the respondent clicked on “you mean something else,” it gave the researcher an opportunity to study other terminologies used for defining gender identities in India.

- e. Self-identified sexual orientation: A nominal variable, this intended to understand a participant’s physical, spiritual and emotional attraction towards a certain sex/gender in relation to their own. Answer options included “heterosexual,” “homosexual/gay/lesbian,” “bisexual,” “pansexual,” “asexual,” “queer,” “questioning,” “something else,” and “don’t know.”
- f. Choice of Identity/Community: In the survey instrument many items directly related to the participant’s identity, and therefore it was considered important to respect their choice. The participants were provided 14 different identity categories from which they could choose, including the options of writing in their own words or choosing they “don’t know.” The chosen term was then plugged into the following items when referring to the participant’s identity.
- g. Disclosure of LGBTQ identity: This ordinal variable measured the level of participant’s disclosure about their LGBTQ identity. The options ranged between “not out at all” to “completely out.”



- d. Join Facebook: This ordinal variable measured the approximate time in number of years that participants had been acquainted with the social networking platform.
4. *Facebook Groups and Participation*: The items in this section sought to measure the participation levels of the respondents.
- a. Facebook Groups definition: Following the pilot survey it was considered pertinent to define Facebook Groups and differentiate it from other features supported by Facebook. The item defined the Groups and asked participants to either agree or disagree with the definition provided. Disagreement led the participant to exit the survey. This item also acted as a validity check to ensure that survey respondents knew what the survey was focusing upon.
  - b. Facebook Groups for LGBTQ: This variable was spread out over a couple of questionnaire items. The first nominal scale item asked participants about how they came across their first Facebook Group for LGBTQ community in India. If it was by invitation, through searches, or just as suggestions. If participants responded that they searched for Facebook Groups, then they were led to two open-ended questions about their process of searching for such Groups and their reasons for searching.
  - c. Number of Facebook Groups: An ordinal level item asked for the number of Facebook Groups for LGBTQ community that the respondent was a part of. A following item asked respondents to share the number of years since joining their first Facebook Group for the community.

- d. Frequency and duration of visit: Two items measured the frequency and duration of the respondents' visits to the Facebook Groups.
  - e. Participation on Facebook Groups: The variable of Participation on Facebook Groups is defined as an active mode where the respondents post or communicate on these groups. One of the key variables in the study, it asked respondents to provide their level of agreement measured using a seven-point Likert scale (1=strongly agree, 7=strongly disagree), to the following statement: "I contribute posts on the Facebook Groups for LGBTQ community in India." A follow-up item further asked about the respondent's activity on Facebook Groups, if they are not actively posting.
5. *Privacy and Facebook Groups*: This variable was intended to measure how important the privacy settings of Facebook Groups are for the respondents. The items were nominal or ordinal level measures asking about respondents' awareness about the privacy settings on the Facebook Groups, whether they check on such privacy settings, and if they are aware of the privacy settings on the various Groups they are a part of. A final item asked respondent about the privacy settings' importance.
6. *Anonymity and Facebook Groups*: Since anonymity is one of the prime variables of study in this research, it was measured using different survey items.
- a. Alternate identity: A nominal level survey item asked respondents if they have an alternate identity profile on Facebook. Since anonymity on social networking sites often lead Internet users to construct an alternate identity in the virtual world, this item was pertinent in understanding if that's also the case with the LGBTQ community users of Facebook Groups.

- b. Reasons for alternate identity: A set of nine items were developed based off the qualitative data and literature inquiring into the reasons that respondents felt the need to create a Facebook profile with an alternate identity, measured using a seven-point Likert scale (1=strongly agree, 7=strongly disagree). Only respondents who said they had an alternate identity were shown the following set of items. The respondents were also given a choice to write in their own words their reasons for keeping an alternate identity based profile.
- c. Performance of identity: Using a sliding scale with scores from 0 to 100 (0 = very uncomfortable and 100 = very comfortable), respondents were asked to assess their comfort levels in *performing their chosen gender and/or sexual identity* on the Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ community in India. Higher the score, the more comfortable and confidence the respondents professed in sharing their lives with these online communities.
- d. Perceived Anonymity: The variable of *Perceived Anonymity* was measured using a six-item instrument proposed by Hite, Voelker, & Robertson (2014). In their endeavor to develop this context independent instrument, they defined PA as “the extent to which individuals perceive that their personal identity is unknown to others or that they are unidentifiable as an individual” (p. 26). Measured using a seven-point Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree, the six items asked participants to convey their level of agreement with statements like “I am confident that others do not know who I am on these Groups” to “My personal identity is known by others.” Due to a lack of internal consistency, the first item was dropped from the survey analysis

provided in Chapter 7. The five-item scale was found to be internally consistent at  $\alpha = 0.88$  (see Table 1). This variable enabled the researcher to gain an insight into how far participants perceived they are anonymous, or their official identity is unknown on Facebook Groups for LGBTQ individuals in India.

7. Group identity: This variable was measured using a total of 19 items adapted and combined from two different scales. The first four items were proposed by Yu, Lu, & Liu (first four items) in their studies on weblogs and knowledge sharing (2010) and asked respondents about their agreement with statements like “I am proud to be a member of the LGBTQ community.” The rest 15 items were adapted from Howard & Magee’s (2013) work on developing a measure for testing online group identity. All the items were measured on the seven-point Likert Scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree. Testing for internal consistency, it was found that a 13-item scale was the most reliable measure for the *Group Identity Scale* ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ), which combined one item from Yu, Lu & Liu’s (2010) scale and 12 items from Howard and Magee’s (2013) scale as shown in Table 1.
8. Self-awareness: The first item asked participants if they edited their responses on these Facebook Groups. Further, referring back to some of the work on the proponents of the SIDE model (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2002), it was found that one of the measures used to determine private and public *self-awareness* in computer mediated communication environment are four items adapted by Matheson & Zanna (1988), from the work of Prentice-Dunn & Rogers (1982). Two items assessed private self-awareness, such as “I have generally been aware of myself...,” and two items assessed

public self-awareness with statements like “I have often wondered about the way I responded and presented myself...” The statements were modified to suit the purposes of this study measuring respondent’s feelings about self-awareness on Facebook Groups and quantified using the seven-point Likert scale (1=strongly agree, 7=strongly disagree). The scale was found to be internally inconsistent (see Table 1) and therefore was dropped from the analysis. Only the first item from each set was used as a measure of Public and Private self-awareness.

9. *Uses of Facebook Groups*: The respondents were asked two open-ended questions adapted from Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade’s article on uses of Internet (2004) to gain an understanding into what they perceive as the uses of such Facebook Groups. The questions are as follows:

- i. Using single, easy-to-understand terms, what do you use Facebook Groups for?
- ii. What uses of Facebook Groups are most important to you?

10. *India and LGBTQ*: The final set of items directly related to understanding and exploring the participants perceptions of the Indian socio-cultural context and their attitude towards the LGBTQ community. The items also asked about individual perceptions of the effects of IPC Section 377.

Table 1 Variable Items measured as a Scale

Variable	$\alpha$	Sample size	Sample mean*	Standard Deviation
Perceived Anonymity Scale (5 items)	0.88	129	3.29	1.48
1. I am confident that others do not know who I am on these Groups			3.62	1.921
2. I believe that my personal identity remains unknown to others			3.49	1.965
3. I am easily identified as an individual by others				
4. Others are likely to know who I am on these Groups			2.96	1.563
5. My personal identity is known by others on these Groups			3.22	1.754
			3.19	1.749
Group Identity Scale (13 items)	0.91	124	4.96	1.06
1. I am proud to be a member of the Facebook Groups for the {Insert choice} community			5.51	1.428
2. I feel a bond with such Facebook Groups.			5.03	1.597
3. I feel solidarity with such Facebook Groups.			5.15	1.603
4. I am glad to be a member of such Facebook Groups.			5.59	1.307
5. I think that such Facebook Groups' members have nothing to be proud of.			4.96	1.792
6. It is pleasant to be a member of such Facebook Groups.			5.65	1.112
7. Being a member of such Facebook Groups gives me a good feeling.			5.62	1.227

8. I often think about the fact that I am a member of such Facebook Groups.		4.56	1.721
9. The fact that I am a member of such Facebook Groups is NOT an important part of my identity.		3.68	1.828
10. Being a member of such Facebook Groups is an important part of how I see myself.		4.49	1.801
11. I have a lot in common with the average member of such Facebook Groups.		4.65	1.603
12. Such Facebook Group members have a lot in common with each other.		5.04	1.346
13. Such Facebook Group members are very similar to each other.		4.54	1.428
Self-awareness Scale		122	
Private self-awareness	0.28**		
1. I am generally aware of myself, my own perspectives and attitudes, when participating in the Facebook Groups.		6.07	0.96
2. I often forget to think about my own self in such Facebook Groups, as my mind is distracted by what's going on in these Groups.		4.84	1.56
Public self-awareness	0.47**		
3. In the Facebook Groups, I have often wondered about the way I have responded and presented myself in comparison to others who are similar to me.		4.38	1.55

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4. In the Facebook Groups, I have been thoughtful of how well I may get along with other members.	5.03	1.31
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\* All the scales were measured using a seven-item Likert scale

\*\*Not internally consistent as a scale

Note: The positively worded items were reversed in all variables so that higher numbers on the scale indicate higher agreement with the construct being measured.

## **Chapter 6: An In-Depth Exploration of the LGBTQ Groups on Facebook**

Lakshmi found her life partner through the Facebook Groups. Niki and Sarah realized their gender and sexual identities by exploring the over 50 gender options provided by Facebook since 2014. Ramesh and Williams use Facebook Groups to network with queer identifying individuals in and around the financial capital of India – Mumbai, to support and counsel them.

This chapter details the key findings derived from 11 in-depth interviews conducted over phone with individuals identifying as belonging to the Indian queer community and users of Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ community in the country. The interviews were followed up with a participant observation of three Facebook Groups, wherein data was collected regarding the activities on the platform. The interviews were transcribed by the researcher and the data was then coded using the NVivo software. The participant observations of the Groups were maintained privately by the researcher, as per the IRB requirements. To maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the three Groups and its members, it was determined that exemplars would not be documented in the dissertation. Images used as exemplars were generic in nature, and therefore determined as potentially harmless. It was evaluated that a search with keywords from the exemplars on Facebook can lead back to the Facebook Groups, thereby generating potential harm to the group members. The data collected during the participant observation has therefore been paraphrased in the following sections in language that is synonymous but different from the actual content.

Following along the suggestions made by Creswell & Miller (2000) regarding how to determine the validity of qualitative findings in research, this study employed two of the eight methods suggested by the authors. First was the process of Triangulation across methods, whereby information gathered through interviews and the participant observation of the

Facebook Groups was put together, and a systematic process was employed to code the data and arrive at the themes described below. The second process involved the researcher's prolonged engagement with the field, in this case the Facebook Groups, over nine months when collecting the ethnographic data. Furthermore, since much of the data collected from the Facebook Groups could not be quoted verbatim, care was taken to contextualize the observations, approach the data from the participants' perspectives, and provide de-identified in-depth data about the Groups observed so that a reader can make decisions regarding transferability (Creswell, 2007). Throughout the data collection process the researcher maintained a level of transparency, as explained in Chapter 5. Every step taken in this research process has been documented in this dissertation to further the goal of providing with a clear idea of how the data was collected and analyzed.

The data from this cyberethnography phase indicates that with the advent of the Internet, the members of the LGBTQ community in India gained a ready resource of information on diverse gender and sexuality. While this may have been the case globally, where Internet has opened the door to various information types (Akcaoglu & Bowman, 2016; Dalsgaard, 2016), for the queer community in India this is particularly relevant, as it can be surmised that the Internet has had a major roleplay in achieving one of the major demands by the LGBTQ movement in India – the decriminalization of Section 377 in 2018. The Internet pulled together the queer counterpublics from all over the country by addressing them through the discourse of queer identity and rights. The web also enabled them to gain international attention and support.

In this research, it has been argued that easily accessible virtual communities such as the Facebook based Groups have added to the process of queer identity construction by providing a space where LGBTQ individuals can network and feel connected. The data suggests that the

Facebook Groups for the queer identifying individuals evolved into a space where the members were enacting their lives as they wanted to, as opposed to what the society demanded. The Facebook Groups became an integral part in the process of many LGBTQ individuals' identity construction as was evident through interviews with the Groups' members.

The 11 interview participants in this research were all at various stages of understanding their gender and sexual identity. Ramesh, William, Sarah, Kumar, Lakshmi, Sundar, and Sayan had accepted and embraced their identities openly to many friends in their real lives, even if not all family members. The remaining participants were at a juncture where even though they had realized their gender and/or sexual identity, they were still closeted to their immediate network of family and friends.

Conceptually it was determined that every aspect of the Facebook Groups, may it be the social networking platform's settings or its roleplay in conveying information, providing virtual support and networking, queer activism and its disadvantages – all played a significant role in how the LGBTQ individuals were forming their identity. While identity determination is a personal process, every individual also searches for recognition and confirmation of their identity by others. Facebook Groups provided that acceptance. Therefore, all the aspects of this social media space contribute to the larger question of this study as to how the Indian queer community can use virtual communities to understand and identify as queer, what it means to be LGBTQ, and how to rightfully survive in a society that is still fighting for food and economic security. In the following sections, the collected data from both the interviews and the cyberethnography has been assimilated and analyzed under different themes that contribute to the overarching question of how Facebook Groups influence the LGBTQ community in India.

## Facebook's Affordances

The Facebook platform's settings provide users with a range of opportunities in terms of identity construction. At an individual level, Facebook makes for easy account creation and allows users to choose their gender identity according to their preferences. In 2014, Facebook introduced more than 50 options allowing users to choose their gender identity or write in a free form field the identity they are comfortable with (Beyer, 2014; Facebook Diversity, 2014; Facebook Diversity, 2015). This measure of going beyond the gender binary was considered a significant step towards inclusivity by the interview participants in this research.

Except male or female, now they actually added under 'others' some 10-20, 30 different categories of people. Until about that time I didn't even know that I was a gender-fluid. So, what I did, I randomly start searching about uhh, all of these like which kind of sexual identity represents uhh what kind of people. So, then I checked about uhh on this gender-fluid word. And gender-fluid word is exactly the same kind of person that I am. (Sarah, personal communication, March 12, 2015)

Furthermore, at the Group level Facebook provides community spaces under Groups which have privacy settings, allowing for a sense of security and confidentiality under the 'closed,' and especially the 'secret' setting.

Facebook's affordance of the creation of an individual profile according to one's identity provides two distinct outcomes – first, the performance of gender and sexual identity. Secondly, the alternate profile creation stems from the perceived anonymity on the web-based platform that allows individuals to consider the possibility of camouflaging their official or social identity. These two factors arguably influence the individual's participation on the Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ community.

**Two profiles, two lives.** The starting point for social networking sites such as Facebook is a user profile which needs a name, an email address or phone number, password, date of birth, and sex. Facebook Community Standards clearly specify that individuals should own only one personal account and use their regular name to be identified on their profiles. The standards discourage users from misrepresenting, manipulating, and/or misusing the platform to create “inauthentic” or “fake” profiles (Facebook, 2018). However, it is not uncommon for users to create multiple personal accounts using different email addresses. The terms fake and inauthentic would imply false information. But the community standards fail to consider the subjective implications of the terms. What is considered as inauthentic by the social networking platform, can be a very real identity for an individual.

You see, as am not out to my family and friends, I don't want... there are certain doubts, okay, like, I have a longer hair for a boy, but I have a short ponytail, so that way something got uhh my people get suspicious you know. They think I am gay. Maybe, that's what I am guessing. You know, I cannot be really engaged with the LGBT community on that profile. So, I needed a different space, so I created this profile... But I don't think it is a fake profile. What makes it fake and what makes it not! Because I know at least a dozen people who fit into that fake profile criteria, but I don't see them as fake because I know them. (Lakshmi, personal communication, April 3, 2015)

Following in Butler's (1990) theorization of gender, sex and sexuality as performative, it can be argued that the Indian LGBTQ community members are forced to repeatedly perform their social identities according to the cultural constructs. However, the possibility of creating multiple accounts or profiles on popular social media platforms provides the LGBTQ identifying

individuals an opportunity to redefine and perform their chosen identity on an alternate profile, which is very real and authentic to their selves.

It was observed that most Facebook Groups had several profiles that were fake as per Facebook's definition or portrayed an alternate identity. In this study, the *alternate identity* is a preferable term since such profiles can be defined as a space where the users perform their chosen gender and/or sexuality. The alternate profiles can be identified easily as the profile owners generally use pseudonyms, pictures of cartoons, animals or art, and provide little to no information about their own selves or their background. Each interview participant was asked if they held any such alternate profile or could shed light on why such profiles existed. Interestingly, two of the participants – Niki and Harish – were using their alternate profile when they responded to the Facebook recruitment post and chose to maintain that identity through the duration of the study.

RQ1: What are the reasons LGBTQ individuals create an alternate identity for their online selves?

Niki shared that she had created an alternate profile solely for the purposes of communicating as an LGBTQ person. The alternate profile became a meaningful part of her life as she joined a Facebook Group for the Indian LGBTQ community in December 2014. Through discussions with other members and learning more about non-normative gender and sexual identities, Niki realized herself as an asexual lesbian. She reflected, “so being a part of this group at least uhh, helped me to be sure of my preferences and to come out to myself at least” (personal communication, March 1, 2015).

Furthermore, two other participants maintained two different profiles, one with their official gender and sexual identity, and the second with their chosen or assumed gender and/or sexual identity. The idea behind creating an alternate identity based profile/s, as understood from the interviews, stemmed from the need to maintain the identity which resonated with the LGBTQ participants concept of their own selves, as well as seeking out an opportunity to perform their identity as they choose. Following from the social identity theory, while individuals have some agency in building their identity it is also dependent upon that identity's acceptance by others. In the context of LGBTQ Facebook Groups, an individual's queer identity is readily accepted as normative. As Warner (2002) argued in his essay that no one really is in the closet when within the space for the queer counterpublic. The closet is there by its relation to the heteronormativity, a presumption that does not exist within the queer space. A place where being queer is normative.

It was also observed that the alternate profiles were also of two different varieties. In one kind, the alternate profile had no identifiable information such as Niki's profile that had an alternate name and images of cartoons; the second type's users chose to post semi-identifiable images of their own selves with their faces covered, along with an alternate name they wanted to be identified with.

Keeping with Goffman's theory about the presentation of self (discussed in Chapter 2), the everyday life, for Facebook Group members with an alternate identity, comprises of a front-stage performance where they present their official identity. Such as Lakshmi, who performed her official identity of a male on the frontstage when working at an established firm and abided by the normative cultural constructs. At the same time, when on Facebook using her second/alternate profile or when with queer identifying friends and partner, her everyday

backstage identity of a transgender person took over the frontstage, while her official gender identity slipped into the backstage. Understandably, the role-reversal between the front and backstage or the multiple identities maintained by many of the LGBTQ individuals has become more complicated with the advent of the Internet, as research suggests that the virtual space provides an opportunity to create a profile that is different from characteristics associated with an individual's social roles (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Miller & Arnold, 2009).

The interview participants further reflected that the fake or anonymous profiles mostly existed since the Indian society was not very accepting of the queer individuals and the users who were still closeted felt that if their alternate identity were to be revealed the consequences would probably not be pleasant. Apart from the fear of being outed or identified by friends and family, and issues of trolling by strangers, participants also shared that doxxing or publishing private identifiable information on the Internet, was another factor that led many LGBTQ identifying members to ensure their own photographs or information was not available on the alternate profiles. Therefore, it can be reasoned that the perception of anonymity on the Internet provides a sense of privacy and control, which plays a major role in creating such alternate profiles (Christopherson, 2007; Peterson, 1997).

The same factors are also applicable for reasons as to why participants use Facebook Groups. Considering the amount of visibly alternate identities being used on the Facebook Groups studied here, it was understandable that the individuals using the Facebook Groups preferred their identities to be kept secret, within a closed circle of people, and therefore the choice of such 'closed' or 'secret' Facebook Groups. As Dreyfuss (2017) also highlighted in their research, the mutual trust among members, especially in secret groups, drives the functional advantages of such Groups.

**Facebook groups privacy settings.** The LGBTQ Facebook Groups that were observed in this research were either ‘closed’ or ‘secret,’ a characteristic that was found to be common among all the Groups that the researcher had initially connected during the recruitment phase. As elaborated in Chapter 2, closed Facebook Groups require new members to be approved by moderators, and the content of the group is only visible to the members. The secret Groups are not visible on any search results and new members can only join when invited by existing members. It was analyzed from the interviews that it is this moderation, privacy and anonymity lent by the social networking platform, which encouraged individuals who identified as LGBTQ to join the Facebook Groups. As posited by the SIDE model (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998), the anonymity of the social media platform and ease of creating a profile, led individuals to seek out other people who they could identify with and in turn affirmed and confirmed their belief, and provided with a sense of belonging to a certain group or network.

Among the three Facebook Groups explored by the researcher, Pride was observably a very popular group and had a little more than 3,000 members by the end of the participant observation period in November 2015. A secret Group, members could only be added into Pride by association with existing members, which was also interesting as for these 3,000 members to come together they all had to be known by someone else in the Group and identify as LGBTQ or an ally. A highly interactive and responsive Group, most posts gathered attention from other members and sometimes had conversations flowing well into 50 odd comments posted under one post. Further, it was also noticed that even though the Group was open to biological females and had several female members, the participation from them was lower than that by males. Such a gender disparity in participation was not observed in case of the other groups. In 2018, the Pride’s group membership increased to 8,766, still predominantly male.

LGBT Freedom was the largest group with more than 15,000 members at the time of the research. Being closed in nature it could be searched by its self-evident name on Facebook, which was identifying the LGBTQ population of India. It was assessed that the members chose to join the Group as one of their first stops when looking through Facebook for various LGBTQ related Groups. On average the Group had 100 new members every week. However, conversations were neither as in-depth nor as frequent as on Pride. Each day there were about eight to 10 posts sharing generic content like news, trivia or other information from various LGBTQ websites and magazines that the Group members found of interest. In 2018, the Group remained a closed space, and the number of members had reduced to 13,145.

Rainbow was the smallest Group with just 249 members at the time of research. This was a closed Group formulated by like-minded people in a city in South India with the purpose of providing a virtual space for queer women to come together and engage in building conversation and events. The Group was fairly limited to a select pool of people and new participants learnt of the Group by association with the existing members. The Group also had several members who were neither female or female identifying, as observed from their Facebook profiles, but could be assumed as allies or queer identifying individuals. The Group had a very uncommon name, which may have further led to the small membership as compared to the other Facebook Groups being researched. In 2018, the Group's privacy setting was changed to secret and the total number of members had increased to 281.

The activity on Rainbow was limited to about one post each day and was made by the group admin, generating little conversation. However, at the same time, from previous communication with members belonging to the Group, it was evident that the members were close-knit and often preferred to use the platform more as a form of network-building

opportunity, and chose personal communication for physical meetings, outside the virtual world. Further Rainbow was also connected to a larger support organization for the LGBTQ community in South India.

Outlining the different nature and characteristics of the Groups is pertinent to this study as it bears relevance in highlighting how the members in these Groups interact, the kind of conversation topics, and the quality of the conversations. However, the researcher has also had to be cognizant of how some of the interview participants repeatedly mentioned that these Groups were sometimes used just for the purpose of networking. Conversations would often be carried forward on personal chats. Sundar, who was open about his gender-fluid identity, further reflected on communication in such Facebook Group:

But I am trying to think if someone wants to be closeted then it might actually be very difficult unless it is a small group and it is very well moderated. Maybe it's possible that they can continue to be there. Even in a group like O\*\*\*\*\*, maybe somebody can be an observer there, because it's a secret support group for LGBT, somebody can be an observer there. But the moment they post I think in some or the other way they do expose their profiles. (Sundar, personal communication, April 7, 2015)

*Secret vs closed.* It was observed that the only secret group in the study sample, Pride, had a lot of communication flowing within the Group as observed in the number of posts. While the type of content varied a lot, it was interesting to observe that Pride was the only group in the sample to share content which was personal in nature like relationship statuses or anecdotes as to how members found their life partners, photographs seeking opinions about their physical appearances or alternate identity performances, and even open proclamations of love and attraction. In one post, a member tagged yet another member and proposed marriage.

Following from the SIDE model it can be argued that due to the sense of anonymity presented by the setting, members who join the secret Facebook Groups, such as Pride, lose their self-awareness when in the Group and find it easier to engage with other members who they identify with. This engagement leads to sharing stories or experiences which are personal in nature, and by means of group assessment of the incident, the members feel reaffirmed about their group and individual identity. This in turn also leads other members to share their own stories, thereby continuing the cycle. Lakshmi, who was a member in a number of such Facebook Groups expressly stated her preference for a secret Group where she was a member.

You see, they have been useful and beneficial in terms of the comfort level that you share with them. It's more in terms of belongingness. And you know \*\*\*\*\* and a couple of other friends on there, I can go to their homes on weekends and spend some time with them. That's what – you know how India is. It's not like that, you know, I am with friends and family and I can be myself. So, it's (the Group) a place where I can be myself you know. (Lakshmi, personal communication, April 3, 2015)

**Group size.** Following from the social impact theory (SIT), which assumes that an individual is influenced by their group's physical characteristics like the influential strength of the group, the proximity of the individual to the group in terms of both space and time at the moment of influence, and finally the number of members present in the group (Latané B. , 1981; Latané & Wolf, 1981), it can be argued that the Facebook Groups set a perfect exploratory ground for the theory. The SIT further posits that with an increase in number, the group has more influence on an individual's conformity level.

Applying the social impact theory to social media has led studies to show that social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter meet the three main criteria of the SIT and can prove

to be strategically useful for public relations managers, advertisers or anyone seeking group influence and conformity (Imran & Arshad, 2012; Penn, 2013). Applied to Facebook Groups for LGBTQ, it can be argued that as the individuals spend more time with the Group, they identify with the Groups aims, ideals and norms, and thereby the LGBTQ Facebook Groups are likely to exert an influence on the individual member. For instance, if a LGBTQ Facebook Group is concerned with the legal rights for the LGBTQ individuals, and the users identify with those aims as being relevant to themselves, then it would lead to increased group influence. For example, individuals are more likely to follow in the calls of action for LGBTQ rights.

Additionally, it was analyzed that the number of members in each of these Groups may have diverse impacts on different individuals; members who are more comfortable as being identified as LGBTQ are likely to embrace the increasing size of a group, but a small sized group may be equally comforting to them wherein they know all the members more personally. However, those who are still in the closet may prefer anonymity of larger groups such as LGBT Freedom, a factor that is unachievable in a small Group like Rainbow, where everyone eventually gets acquainted with each other.

In terms of the influential strength of the Groups, being an LGBTQ individual, an online group which gives the individual a space to be themselves and identifies with their individual aims in life, could arguably be seen as a motivation and influence for the individual users. Further, given the nature of social media and the immediacy of access, the Facebook Groups also gave the users the option to follow the Group activities at all points in time, ensuring a constant touch which in turn can influence the individual.

Following from the above-mentioned reasoning and comparing that with the observed Groups, it was found that Pride, with a relatively large group size, seemed to assert greater

influence in terms of engagement and communication occurring within that space, as opposed to LGBT Freedom which had more than 15,000 members. The anonymity provided by the secret setting of Pride may have added to the persuasion capacity of the Group, as it meant that each of the members had at least one other member who knew them and had added them into the Group in the first place. But LGBT Freedom, despite having a large membership did not seem to exert any influence on its members. However, it can be reasoned that it may have housed more closeted individuals who preferred the method of lurking or observing the Group activities rather than engage and expose their identity. Rainbow was the smallest Group in the observation pool and did not exhibit enough communication to determine a pattern. However, as stated earlier, the Group members may have used the space just for the purposes of connecting in private messages and networking in offline spaces. Knowing each other at a more personal level may have acted as an influencing factor, but there is no evidence to support that assumption.

*Types of group members.* It was also observed that there are different kinds of members on these Groups. Efforts were made to differentiate between them on the basis of their participation levels. Observably there were silent members on each group who did not communicate or engage on the Groups but held memberships. Observing the smallest group of Rainbow, which was secret in nature, the researcher found that only about 20 members (out of 249) would engage actively by posts or comments on a regular basis. LGBT Freedom, the largest group in the study with 15,000 members, on an average had about 70 active members every week (calculated from average number of posts and comments per week). Majority of the members in LGBT Freedom remained silent on the Group. Internet research categorizes such members on virtual communities as “lurkers” and arguably they make a large section of all online communities (Rosenmann & Safir, 2006).

Preece, Nonnecke and Andrews listed various reasons for lurking in their 2004 study, including factors such as “just reading/browsing is enough,” “had no intention of posting,” “nothing to offer,” “shy about posting,” “wants to remain anonymous,” “messages or group low quality,” “long delay getting responses.” Some of those reasons were also echoed by the interview participants in the current research.

I was just there (on the Groups) for help, support, to make friends, but I wouldn't say I was a (active) member or something of these Groups... I just observe what's happening on the Groups. I wanted to let myself know what's happening with LGBT and all.

(Harish, personal communications, April 3, 2015)

According to Rosenmann and Safir's (2006) research, the members who are lurkers seek out the virtual groups for a positive reinforcement of their own selves due to the offline world's apathy towards them. The silent observation eventually leads their way into realizing and disclosing their identity virtually. But in this research, it was found that not all silent observers were necessarily searching for an affirmation.

The active members on the Groups can also be categorized into three different subsets on the basis of their engagement quantity and quality. The first subset were the activists and/or group administrators, who were more vocal about their thoughts on gender and sexuality issues occurring both nationally and internationally. They also posted content on social discrimination incidents against the LGBTQ community and can be said to be ‘conversation starters,’ a tag recently introduced by Facebook on their Groups.

On the secret group, a second subset of active members was found, as those who chose to share their personal experiences and lives on the Groups. Many interview participants stressed

that members who posted the most on such online communities about their own selves were either closeted or just using the space to seek physical relationships. A third broad category included members who would show passive interest towards the Group contents with engagement in the forms of ‘likes’ on various posts shared on the Groups. Observably, they never commented or made any original post on the Groups.

In this research, a fourth category was found to exist which was in between that of lurking and being active. Such members would mostly spend their time as observers, publicly identified as queer, and posted event-based information or updates occasionally. Rosenmann and Safir’s (2006) explication of lurkers did not account for this category. But as noted by Rakesh in his interview, they would also use the Groups to learn more about the other members present in the groups, understand their personalities from their public and private conversations, and conduct a form of personal research on the kind of conversations flowing in the Groups.

I am not very *active* in most of the groups. Uhhh... I don’t post. I just look at those Groups, that’s all...The people who have commented on the post. Some of the comments are very crude to me. So, I have unfriended those people. This is a very good point for me. And I have also come to know from this Group of people who are very much hypocrite. They comment something, and they are saying (thinking) something else.  
(Rakesh, personal communication, March 24, 2015)

Facebook Groups affordances play a major role in determining how this virtual space is enabling queer identity building. Its ease of access allows LGBTQ individuals in India to come on board and explore their identity, using factors such as gender options and choosing its audience, and performing an identity that does not necessarily comply with their social roles. The Facebook Groups further provide with a space for the queer counterpublic to come together

based on their shared identity, beliefs, opinions, and goals, and form a collective. Following in Warner's (2002) ideation, the Facebook Groups can be argued to be the "protected venues" within which the counterpublic of the Indian LGBTQ community can participate in the discourse about queer sexuality and gender identity. For the questioning and closeted individuals, this virtual queer space not only provides a space to explore their identity, but also find people they identify with. And it is by participation in such a space that their identities are "formed and transformed" and they become a part of the counterpublic (Warner, 2002). Explored in the next sections are the different kinds of information that Facebook Groups provide, which in turn enables the LGBTQ individual's exploration of their own identity and aids in their identity building process.

RQ2. What are the uses of Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ community?

### **Facebook Groups and Information**

As seen in previous research on Facebook Groups (for example Pi, Chou, & Liao, 2013; Park, Kee & Valenzuela, 2009), this study also found that the virtual communities are a definite gateway of information and a knowledge-sharing space. This was particularly the case for the Indian LGBTQ individuals who had access to the Internet and were closeted or questioning about their identity. At the time of the cyberethnography in 2015, the LGBTQ community was still largely seen as "illegal" due to the misinterpretation of the IPC Section 377 that criminalized non-carnal intercourse with man, woman or animal. Therefore, there were a lack of avenues that could be easily approached for basic information on diverse gender and sexual identities. These

Groups acted as an easily accessible channel of information about health, family and marriage, laws and LGBTQ rights in India, and crimes against LGBTQ community that may have gone unreported or underreported. The Facebook Groups were also used for the purposes of promoting various events around the country and helped in connecting members in semi-urban or rural areas to the larger community. One striking feature for all the Groups however was the amount of information and knowledge that the members shared about being queer, particularly in India.

**Gender and sexuality education.** Following from the researcher's personal experiences of growing up in India and studies on sex education in the country (Ismail, Rao, & Wylie, 2015; Puri, 1999), it is reasonable to assume that majority of the children in India receive little to no information on the topic of gender and sexuality beyond the basics on the human anatomy and reproductive systems. To know more about the diverse social identities based on gender and sexuality, the youth must seek out specialized disciplines or resort to their own curiosity to lead the way.

Studies suggest that the existing sex education program in India is not sufficient in providing a comprehensive overview of sex and sexuality. This may be partly due to the deeply rooted stigma attached with sexual activity, which in turn influences the political decisions on how restrictive the government initiatives shall be in the country (Ismail, Rao, & Wylie, 2015; Puri, 1999). In a study exploring the media effects on sexual activity of adolescents living in one of the largest cities in India, it was found that parents rarely discuss the topic of sex with their children (Kumar et al., 2013). The lack of clear communication on sex, gender and sexuality issues from social institutions such as family and school are a major contributor to the Indian youth seeking outside sources on the topic, particularly the Internet.

Interview participant Sarah shared that at the age of 15 (year 2004) they was really confused about their gender and sexual identity as sometimes they “felt feminine” as opposed to the normative gender expression associated with their biological gender. Unable to find an answer, Sarah turned to the custom chat rooms on Yahoo! to understand their identity better. Entering a chat room for psychologists, they posed their dilemma and was advised to search around chatrooms for the LGBTQ community.

Until that point I thought myself as the single, most abnormal person in the whole world, honestly! Honestly, I was thinking that I am the abnormal person in the whole world and I am one and only born. But when he told me about the crossdressers, then I started searching in, and actually found that no, many many people are there... like me. So uhhh then I started talking to LGBT people more and more, more and more. And then I slowly get more and more information from (places like) these FB Groups you are talking about. I got my information from most of these FB Groups only, and some of the Yahoo! rooms as well. All from the Internet, all from the Internet! (Sarah, personal communication, March 12, 2015)

Williams had a similar story to share where he read everything available on the Internet. Bandita and Niki resorted to the Internet unable to find an answer about their identity and found Facebook Groups to provide a social Group where they can interact with people who identify similarly to them.

Due to the lack of social resources provided by the mainstream society, such as education on diverse gender and sexual identities, as noted in Chapter 1, the Facebook Groups often formed a protected venue to discuss and debate queer terminologies and what they could possibly mean. For example: Could bisexuals be trusted? This was a topic of discussion on

different occasions on both LGBT Freedom and Pride. The discussions initiated by different individuals over various points in time, brought forth interesting explanations and attempts by people who had some knowledge to share the same with those who were still unaware. Images or charts as shown in Figure 3, which covered a wide possibility of sexual identity that one may hold, was uploaded to the Groups for further reference and to help individuals understand more about themselves.

Interestingly, much of the native language-based terminologies for alternate gender and sexuality was lost on the LGBTQ members interacting on the Facebook Groups observed. However, this may not hold true for all the existing Facebook Groups and virtual communities for the Indian LGBTQ community since the platform supports 13 local languages and there may exist various spaces wherein members communicate in the local language and use more colloquial terminologies for LGBTQ related conversations.

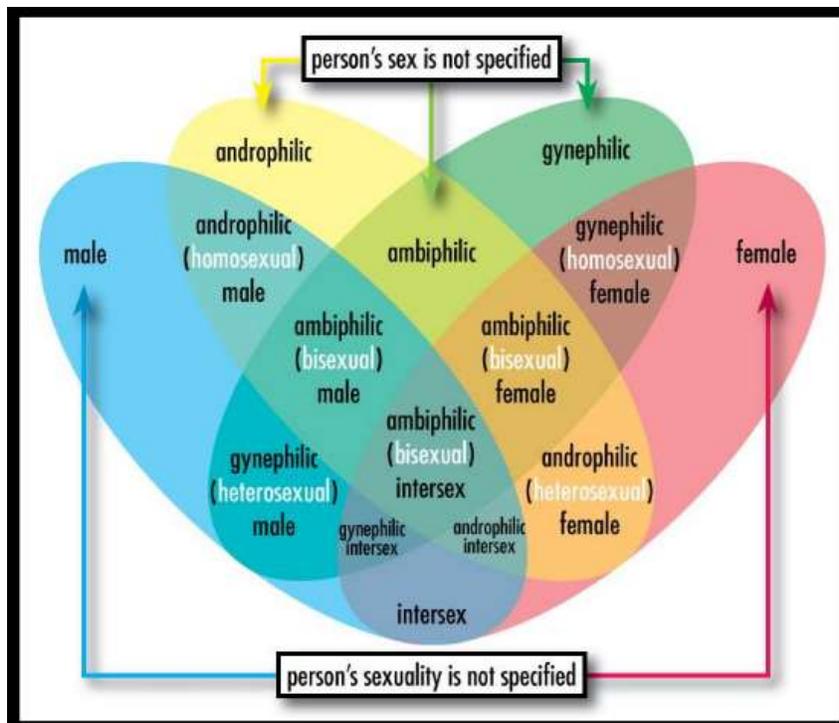


Figure 3: Pride (pseudonym), August 31, 2015

**Health.** Sharing their test results for sexually transmitted diseases (STD) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV/AIDS) on the Facebook Group Pride, one member encouraged the rest of the Group to engage in safe sex and be tested regularly. Discussions about health, safe sex, sex-reassignment surgery (SRS) in the country, LGBTQ friendly doctors and health centers, led to the understanding that majority of the individuals had little to no resources on such questions.

Till now, maybe, I got only one information which is useful for me, which is about LGBTQI friendly doctors. You can go and consult with them. But in Guwahati we don't have such – all the information were doctors from Delhi, Kolkata, maybe from Mumbai. In Assam, we don't have such doctors. (Bandita, personal communication, March 10, 2015)

Lakshmi also shared about her participation in certain Groups to gather more information and resources about the transition process. Talking with members who identified similarly, and either planned to or had already undergone the transition enabled Lakshmi to prepare herself for the eventual process. In 2014, the Indian Supreme Court made a landmark ruling by allowing transgender individuals to identify as the official “third gender” in the country. Adding a third gender identity category to the long-standing gender binary, India marked a significant step towards equality (Verma & Najar, 2014). In recognition of the pains, trials and tribulations that trans individuals undergo during their physical transitions, the Supreme Court also ruled that the Indian government shall legally recognize the gender identity chosen by each individual post sex reassignment surgery (Mahapatra, 2014).

During the interviews, Bandita further shared their desire to travel outside the country in order to undergo a transition to align their biological sex with their gender identity. They

believed, from what information they could gather through Google searches, that SRS was an illegal practice in India. Unfortunately, Bandita was mistaken since at the time of this research, in 2015, there was no legal precedent to sex reassignment surgeries. Medical practitioners such as Narendra Kaushik of the OLMEC Center, and Anubhav Gupta of Sri Ganga Ram Hospital, both in New Delhi, have been performing such transitions for almost a decade (Saxena, 2016). SRS however is an expensive option for most of the trans identifying individuals as it can cost anywhere between INR 2 to 8 lakhs for a single surgery (\$2,700 to \$10,862 USD). Indian states such as Tamil Nadu and Kerala however have come forward in the years since the 2014 ruling to provide financial and medical support to the transgender people in their states (Jose & Banerji, 2018; Suresh, 2016).

In 2015, the state governments were yet to proclaim any support to the transgender community. However, it was observed that the Facebook Groups' members frequently asked and shared information on SRS procedures, the legal steps, timeframe, costs and further deliberate upon the associated risks, such as lack of counselling, physical distress or problems caused by inexperienced surgeons. The deficiency of knowledge and opportunities made the Groups indispensable in this regard, as much of the community, particularly individuals located in cities and towns away from the urban metropolises, had limited access to reliable and personalized resources about SRS procedures.

Instances such as the member sharing their medical test results on the Facebook Groups was found on two different occasions and it lent a personal touch to health issues. It demonstrated a situation where an individual took control of their agency, and instead of the Group influencing the individual identity, it was the individual member who attempted to influence the Group's actions as a collective. Being conscious about STD and AIDS, and

witnessing a fellow member's experience, can lead others to prioritize safety measures as opposed to formal messages concerning safe sex issues. Therefore, it was observed that Facebook Groups provided not only information but could also act as an enabling force to motivate the members for pursuing safer and better healthcare, while informing them about the problems such as prejudicial violence against LGBTQ patients by various doctors (Phadke, 2015).

**Events for Indian LGBTQ.** The Groups also became a consistent venue for promoting various events related to the LGBTQ community which occurred in offline spaces around the country. But some of the Groups also hosted online events for their members, to promote camaraderie. Ramesh, an admin for a popular Facebook Group shared, "We also have events which are online. Like for example, a photography contest where people would just send in pictures and the whole voting process will take place online" (personal communication, February 24, 2015).

**Advocacy events.** One of the primary reasons for creating Groups such as Pride and Rainbow was the possibility of building a virtual network which could thereon facilitate physical meets by drawing consensus among the members, and other like-minded individuals or Groups, as confirmed by the Group admins. However, all of these groups turned into a platform for not just organizing informal physical gatherings, but also for advertising and inviting the members to events which were more formally organized. This offline-online relationship also broke away from the significant advantage of the virtual environment, that of perceived anonymity. Furthermore, it gave rise to a more political identity to the LGBTQ community.

The Facebook Group, Pride, had a more physical offline presence and actively worked towards creating safe space for the LGBTQ community in the capital city of New Delhi. To that

end, they organized the screening of a play on August 30, 2015 and promoted the event across the various Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ community in India. The soliloquy was to feature a mother's realization about her son's sexuality and the posts promoting the play received an immense amount of interest from the online groups. However, the event ran into significant controversy as one of the organizing groups pulled out and left the play in a lurch. According to the conversations on the Groups, the fallout was a result of political differences among the various groups of the organizing committee. The controversy led the remaining organizers to resort to an alternate venue for the play, which was far from ideal.

What was interesting in this instance was observing how the organizers, primarily Pride, and some other individual members, chose to voice their opinion across the various Groups including but not limited to the three groups which are being analyzed here. This led to several avid debate and discussions about the political differences within the LGBTQ community. Much of these discussions however could not be documented or reported for the purposes of privacy as the members voiced opinions meant for the community alone. But what was evident was the use of the platform as a political space where the LGBTQ counterpublic were not only debating about issues with the larger Indian public, but also among themselves. The diversity within the LGBTQ spectrum is often underplayed in the mainstream discourse on gender and sexuality. However, inside the Indian queer community the differences are not just based on gender and sexual identity, but also demarcated by class, caste, language, gender-role within relations, roles within the community (Boyce, 2006; Dasgupta, 2013; Gupta, 2005).

Event announcements further ranged from LGBTQ film festivals encouraging awareness into queer sexuality to city-based Pride Parades. One such event had a panel discussion, art exhibition and play, targeted at discussing what was termed as the 'untold issue' of suicide by

LGBTQ identifying individuals in the country. The event hosted in a major Indian city emphasized the need for educating the community about the problems arising out of the social intolerance towards non-normative gender and sexuality in India that lead up to self-inflicted harm, and how to address the problems. While there is no official statistic on the number of LGBTQ suicides in India, mainstream media and organizational reports claim that the number is rising, particularly in rural areas where there are no support organizations (16 LGBT suicides in 18 months, 2015; Dey, 2018; Gwalani, 2015). The mainstream society's non-acceptance and ignorance, followed by abuse in the form of ridicule and bullying, the lack of approval by immediate social circle of family and friends, and relationship fall outs when partners are forced to conform to the demands of the heteronormative society, have led to a point where advocacy events on self-harm is a required step towards raising awareness and providing visible support to the queer community (Gwalani, 2015; 16 LGBT suicides in 18 months, 2015). Even on the Facebook Groups in this study, individuals posted about their inclination towards self-harm due to the unbearable social pressures or circumstances (discussed later in the 'Support' section).

Following the events, the Groups would also become abuzz with photographs from the events and discussion about the activities that took place. For some of the members who participated in an LGBTQ event for the first time, it also turned into a moment of acknowledging their own feelings of "exhilaration," "excitement," and "liberation." Some of the members also posted about realizing the communal support that was growing. It can be argued here that such explicit identification with the community, particularly for first-timers, was a positive affirmation for the still closeted individuals who were observing the Group activities.

*Entertainment events.* Events for just entertainment and networking were also a commonplace occurrence within the Groups. The LGBTQ counterpublic organized parties, dinners, get-together, movie nights, festivals, and joined hands for performances such as flash-mobs. The events however were a contentious topic for closeted individuals who were still battling their personal dilemmas and fear of coming out.

Sharing her experience of a meeting invite, Niki said, “Till date I haven’t face(d) even one person in real, with this identity. And I have seen the entire group with this identity, so I skipped that meeting, didn’t went (go) there.” The meeting was for the purposes of celebrating the festival of colors or Holi, by the LGBTQ community. However, Niki stressed during the interview that she had a distinct dislike for physical proximity to any human being. While it was indicative of haphophobia or the fear of being touched, it seemed that Niki was unaware of it being an anxiety disorder. Instead she seemed to blame herself for not being able to be ‘normal’ around other people, including little children. Niki’s situation was also reflective of the possibility where the LGBTQ individual’s social unacceptance also leads them to suppress other physical or psychological issues for fear of being outed. But this in turn compounds the problems for the individual being who ends up neglecting their physical and psychological well-being.

The events further demonstrated the differences that exist within the LGBTQ community. Sharing an event detail from the popular online dating platform Planet Romeo, Sarah underscored the dress code of the event for the members of the Pride Group. The event, which was to be a party in an upscale sports bar in New Delhi, highlighted the dress code, with a broad black underline as, “YOUR STYLE & COMFORT.(BUT DECENT).NO CD/TG/SLIPPERS.” Although slipper may have been the rule for the establishment where the party was being hosted, Sarah reflected in their post that it was offensive to categorize cross-dressing and transgender

individuals into the same group as slippers and barring them from joining in the party. The post led to significant reflections by the Group members on the transphobia that exists within the LGBTQ community and the predominance of gay male rights over that of the rest of the community. The discussion did not focus much on the cross-dressing individuals as much as it did on the issue of transphobia that affects the community. However, it was clear that the members felt there was a clear distinction between the gay identifying individuals in the community and the rest of the LGBTQ spectrum.

**Global news.** Among the number of posts shared on these Facebook Groups it was observed that a significant amount focused on news related to the LGBTQ community from not just all over the country, but across the world. While news in the mainstream media often flowed according to the power dynamics of the country, the Facebook Groups provided the community with a channel of newsworthy incidents, events, and changes for the community. The news articles sourced from various websites, magazines and personal weblogs, and pooled into one space provided the opportunity for members to browse through them easily and engage in the shared knowledge by means of discussions on the Groups.

The purpose of sharing such news articles located in various corners of the web could also be seen as symbolic of encouragement and support for the community, and thereby motivating members to talk and develop an approach which was supportive of their life decisions. It was observed that most of the news stories shared were inspirational articles such as that of a teenager in New Delhi, India, who was assigned male at birth and was eventually able to transition from male to female (Choudhury, 2015), or the story of Kayden Coleman from Philadelphia, United States, a trans man who found himself pregnant a decade after his transition from female to male (Moore, 2015). Success stories included that of the ex-ITV reporter,

Jonathan Willoughby, who transitioned from male to female and returned to the screen in 2015, and interestingly enough had changed her name to India (Figure 5). The news that the Irish Marriage Equality Bill passed in October 2015 followed by the Chilean law which made civil union between same-sex couples legal in the same month, made it into the Groups with an upbeat emotion.



Figure 4: LGBT Freedom (pseudonym), November 8, 2015

One significant news item in this regard, which was particularly motivating for the Group members to read was about K. Prithika Yashini, the first transgender police official of the country (BBC, 2015; Subramani, 2015). Following the Indian Supreme Court's decision to recognize transgender people as an official third gender in 2014, this news was motivating for the Group members and was evident in the number of 'likes' that the post garnered, which was 91 at the time of research (Figure 6). Earlier the news about the first transgender individual to be appointed as a college principal in June 2015, Manabi Bandopadhyay, was also shared among these Facebook Groups and met with positive reactions (PTI, 2015).



Figure 5: Pride (pseudonym), November 16, 2015

The Groups also became an avenue for promoting and launching mainstream endeavors related to the LGBTQ community like the promotion of movies like *Dunno Y2... Life is a moment* (2015), an Indian-Norwegian romantic drama, and *Paribhasha* (2015), a short film in Hindi, among others. The niche audience for such movies required them to be promoted among the community with the best possible means, and the Facebook Groups became one such channel.

Earlier movies with an underlying theme of alternate sexuality or gender identity, like Bollywood movies *Fire* (1996) and *My Brother Nikhil* (2005), met with much controversy upon their commercial release. However, compared to their Bollywood counterparts, movies like *Dunno Y2... Life is a moment* lacked the star cast or the support, and therefore often never reached the larger audience. Facebook Groups stepped into that space and the movies were promoted among the community. It also spread the awareness of how the Indian film industry

was increasingly focusing on the LGBTQ stories, and this was significant considering the impact of the film industry across the country. However, while some of the movie promotions met with silence, some were criticized by the members' right at the outset for titillation under the tag of LGBTQ such as the Telegu movie *Affair* featuring the romantic story of a lesbian couple.

The Facebook Groups also became an avenue to pen personal encounters or experiences which were newsworthy for the community. However, not all news was motivational as some updates brought home the message of intolerance towards the LGBTQ community, such as Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity which stopped giving up children for adoption to single parents out of fear that the parents might be gays or lesbians and therefore it would be against the Catholic religious principles that the charity held (DNA, 2015).

### **Networking on Facebook Groups**

Benefit, the major benefit that I see from these kind of Facebook pages (Groups) is that it helps people to be aware, to understand what they are, where they belong to. Helps a lot of people not get violated, helps a lot of people help others who are being violated. Then we have numbers of counsellors available on the Internet, through Facebook Groups, and we can reach out to the people in all these nooks and crannies of the small cities and small towns. (Williams, personal communication, March 10, 2015)

The telecommunication revolution in India has had that unprecedented effect of connecting the country in more ways than what previous forms of communication could. In its 2016-17 report, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India reported 1170.18 million people in India had wireless telecommunication subscription, among which 42.54% were identified as rural subscribers. Further statistics also state that the total number of Internet and Broadband subscribers in the country was up by 7.84% from the previous year, and among the 422.19

million subscribers, 136.52 million were identified from rural areas. Therefore, approximately 32% of the Indian population is using the Internet as of the 2016-17 report, which is a significant difference than where the country stood a decade ago (compare at 13.54 million in 2008-09).

This substantial increase in the use of Internet made platforms such as Facebook and Google an important medium to reach out to the masses beyond the urban centers. Williams, who was actively involved with a popular Facebook Group as an administrator, shared that in his experiences he had come across several LGBTQ identifying people who were located far away from the urban centers. For them, Internet based communication such as available on Facebook became an important medium to connect with the community.

The collected data suggests that many of the members came to the Facebook Groups just to know other individuals like them. But some also came in search of love and relationships. Therefore, there is a distinct difference in the kind of connection that the Groups provide – there is friendship, professional and advocacy networking, and romantic relationships. However, what is pertinent to note here is that this networking led to a stronger identification with the community which in turn reinforced the LGBTQ individuals' personal identity. The social acceptance of one's chosen identity is a significant move towards identifying oneself as a queer individual, and the virtual networks provided with that acceptance.

**Being friends.** The Groups provided much-needed peer network or friends for the LGBTQ individuals, who shared similar identities and issues or were more accepting of an individual's LGBTQ identity. Some relationships culminated in friendships in the physical world, such as that of Sarah, who found 15 LGBTQ identifying friends through these Groups,

living in the same city or near about as them. Sarah started to meet them for dinner, parties, or just simple get togethers about twice a month. But some of the friendships remained restricted to their virtual existence.

I think I have a few friends there (referring to the Groups), one is from Delhi and he's something transsex... gender fluid. He's actually a male, but sometimes gender-fluid happens, he might dress like a girl and sometimes like a boy. He's like this. There's another friend there, and we both share our feelings sometimes. Not every time, but sometime. And he's one of my friends. (Bandita, personal communication, March 10, 2015)

Virtual friendship has its novelty in its very characteristic of perceived anonymity. Niki shared her own story about how she befriended people through her alternate profile and kept the friendship limited to the virtual space, thereby remaining anonymous to her friends.

**Professional networking.** The Groups aided many of the activists and physical event organizers to connect with the larger LGBTQ community to gather participants for organizing events. Resonating Williams' thoughts about the reach of Facebook, Sundar reiterated how the Groups have been instrumental in reaching out to the LGBTQ identifying individuals located outside the purview of the support organizations in urban areas. Williams further stated that sometimes, the intolerance shown towards the social media posts about LGBTQ events or awareness content helped the activists to narrow down the locations or places where they need to work more in order to dispel the misguided knowledge about the queer community among the general public.

Posts targeted at recruiting participants for research or promoting job vacancies that may be of interest to the queer community were also found on the Groups. However, as interview

participants sometimes stressed that it wasn't just about being an LGBTQ individual. It was a sense of belonging, a space where they could trust each other and feel liberated.

One fine day I had some issues at work you know, and I replied that I would like some help, I was supposed to conduct a survey, you know, as part of my official work, and you know, I knew nothing about surveys. So, one of the members asked me to come over and said, "why don't you come over and I will teach you." So, the next day he took time and he helped (me) to understand how to frame a hypothesis and not only the questionnaire. So, you know, it's not just about LGBT, and that's what I like about O\*\*\*\*\*." (Lakshmi, personal communication, April 3, 2015)

**In search of love.** When asked as to why LGBTQ individuals join these Facebook Groups, two of the interview participants immediately responded that it was a quick way to find "a mate." Sayan and Rakesh shared their experiences of how they have seen individuals covertly search out for partners to share a physical relationship with. But observations of the Group exhibited that being covert was not a strong suit for all the members.

A number of posts and conversation threads on the Groups were found to revolve around romantic relationships within the LGBTQ population of the country. The posts focused on the physical, emotional, and factual aspects of queer relationships. Such as "12 tips for an amazing first-time sex with the woman you're in to," aimed for lesbian members was shared on Rainbow. The contents also included quotes of love and relationships, light-hearted jokes and comments about the 'straight' society or flirtatious posts which were typically followed by healthy teasing of the concerned individuals and encouragement from fellow members. Due to the rising number of such relationship seeking or building posts on the Groups, the admins for LGBT Freedom created a second closed Group for the purposes of dating. While the second Group was not a part

of the analysis, a search for similar dating Groups led to multiple other sites and a possibility for further studies about LGBTQ dating in India. Applications such as Grindr, PlanetRomeo and Tinder are popular dating apps. However, as noted by many of the interview participants, Facebook was still a popular choice for many members seeking physical relationships. Rainbow was the only group that seemed to be lacking in such conversations.

Group members were further found to have serious conversations relating to fidelity within a relationship among LGBTQ couples, seeking opinions and advice, and understanding how relationships may differ for the various sexualities. Some questions were directly related to sexual practices for the queer community, while some others stated frustrations or disappointments with life due to social circumstances where being openly queer outside the metropolitan cities in the country was quite unheard of.

*Family and marriage.* At the time of this research, the IPC Section 377 remained as one of the largest concerns for the LGBTQ community. There is no legal stipulation against same-sex marriages in the country, however as noted by Suraj Sanap from the Lawyers Collective in India, LGBTQ individuals “solemnizing a same-sex marriage in India may be interpreted as ‘intending’ to violate the law under Sec. 377, as ‘consummation of marriage’ by sexual relations is intrinsic to a marriage, as per both social and legal norms” (Raja, 2017).

On the Groups, the members were found to have ardent discussions revolving around the possibility of raising a family, complete with children, for same-sex or queer identifying couples. The members shared their acquired knowledge about adoption issues in India and the legal requirements when it comes to single, unmarried men and women. The adoption issues were more complicated for trans individuals looking to adopt a child. Even though transgender individuals in the country were given the legal right to identify as “third gender” in 2014, the

child adoption rules for them are vague. The official laws only identify the gender binary for the adoptive parent(s) and are yet to incorporate the third gender category. This makes legal adoptions seem like a distant reality for transgender people.

The Group discussions also touched upon the possibilities of surrogacy, particularly on the secret group of Pride. The other two Groups were comparatively passive about the topic of children. This led to the analysis that the secret setting of Pride not only lent a sense of anonymity and privacy, but it was observably close-networked and intimate, and led to more productive discussions about such issues. One example was sharing contacts for possible surrogacy services open to homosexual Indian nationals. India is one of the leading countries when it comes to international surrogacy since the practice's commercialization in 2002 and has led to considerable exploitation of the surrogate mothers (Verma T. , 2017). In 2016, a Bill was proposed to monitor the process closely and abolish commercial surrogacy altogether, and in December 2018 the Bill was passed in the Lok Sabha (NDTV, 2018). The Bill today protects surrogate mothers from becoming baby-making machines, but at the same time it also prohibits single individuals, same-sex couples, and unmarried couples from being able to initiate the process and has thereby become a discriminatory rule.

Discussions such as the above often became emotional for the members who hoped for an ideal family with their partners and children, but only to know that the law of the land would become a barrier at various points. However, at such junctures the members also lent each other mental and emotional support.

### **Virtual Support**

Only because of these social sites and media that these (LGBTQ) people are actually evolving. I mean people from every spectrum... Because, I don't know how much you

would second me in this case, but you can open up about yourself more to a person you don't know. You are getting compassion, love, support, protection, and everything from a person who happens to be a complete stranger to you. So, you kind of open up to that person more than the person within your family. (Sayan, personal communication, May 27, 2015)

In line with previous research on Facebook Groups' effective roleplay as support groups (Oliver et al., 2015), all interview participants in this study agreed upon the point that the easily accessible virtual space and their affordance of maintaining anonymity led the Facebook Groups to emerge as a support mechanism. The debate was more about the kind of support received and its effectivity. The Indian society and the Section 377 law had made it difficult for most LGBTQ individuals to be forthright about their identity. The Facebook Groups members who shared similar experiences and stories acted as a shoulder of support. "You see, they have been useful and beneficial in terms of the comfort level that you share with them. It's more in terms of belongingness," said Lakshmi (personal communication, April 3, 2015).

At times the conversations within the Group would escalate into a serious amount of counselling for members following posts like "it all ends" or those which suggested a frantic cry for help. In one such post in November 2015, a member posted on LGBT Freedom that they were unable to endure the pressures, presumably from family, and wanted to run away and live with someone who identified as queer. The post saw immediate follow up by other members trying to counsel the individual into being strong, determined and not cave in to social pressures. Some empathized with the individuals, while others provided practical suggestions involving education, looking for employment opportunities to gain financial stability and then consider

becoming independent wherein they can move in to a place and life where they can be themselves.

In another such instance, a member of Pride shared a post loosely suggesting the possibility of being depressed and committing harm to themselves. Within the span of the next hour, 15 members were found to engage with the post and comment on it, asking about the individual's welfare, providing the opportunity to talk if needed, and encouraging to never give up in life and fight back. The member who had initially posted about self-harm did not engage with the post any further. However, observing other similar cases on the Groups, the interaction between the distressed individual and other members resembled an offline support group meeting, where individuals share their stories and others lend their supportive and empathizing words. Although these instances did not lead to the conclusion that the Groups had any impact on the individual decisions, what was observed was the virtual but immediate support structure that followed such posts.

Ramesh, who was also working with an NGO for LGBTQ rights in 2015, recounted an incident when a Facebook Group helped to deter one of the members from committing suicide. The member who had been suffering from severe depression had made a post on the Group that he might commit suicide. The post led the group admins to get in touch with the individual personally and connect the member with a counselor, averting the drastic steps.

At the same time, the experience of receiving virtual or physical support from Facebook Groups was not even for every participant. Niki shared an experience where one of the members, and a dear friend, albeit virtual, was under house-arrest and the friend's girlfriend had posted on the Facebook Group asking for physical help. But for hours they received none. Bandita, located in the north-eastern part of India felt that even though the Facebook Groups provided

information and awareness, the lack of physical touch made the Groups artificial in nature. According to Bandita, the presence and support in the virtual space did not substitute or satisfy the need for support and friendship in the physical world: "...there are no physical advantage *na*. Nobody would say that come to my house, and I can share with you or let's meet somewhere. No such thing happens." This experience was also reflective of the point that while the virtual groups had been able to play an active role in urban and metropolitan cities like Mumbai, New Delhi or Kolkata, where the LGBTQ community would engage in physical social gatherings, it was unable to affect a physical impact in the smaller cities and towns across the country. Months later, Bandita was found to have made a similar post on Facebook asking members for some support, as she considered running away from her home. The post had no response. The researcher tried getting in touch with Bandita after she observed the post due to concerns for their safety but was unable to connect in any way.

**Out of the closet.** Following from Warner's theorization of the public and counter-public, it can be assessed that within the queer counterpublic space, "no one is in the closet" (2002). The closet exists in reference to the heteronormative social structure, but in the absence of that structure within the queer space the closet also ceases to be real. This reinforces the queer identity for the individual members and enables those who are confused, questioning or closeted to realize and identify themselves. They can then carry this identity outside the queer space and thereby come out of the closet within the heteronormative social structure of India. The virtual space of Facebook Groups plays a crucial role in this regard as it provides the mental support to the individuals.

So, a lot of people would post their own personal experiences in terms of coming out. I know a few people who have only come out only [sic] after seeing that others have been

able to do it so successfully. So, a lot of younger kids have seen older members posting stories about how they have approached their mothers and fathers and spoken to them about themselves. And then, having seen that they have had positive experiences, have done, umm, changed themselves, and been able to come out themselves and open up to their families. (Ramesh, personal communication, February 24, 2015)

Many of the interview participants stressed the point that it was primarily closeted individuals who accessed and communicated on these Facebook Groups. The Group members shared their own coming out stories and encouraged other members to reveal their identity to family and friends. The members who were out also emphasized the need to understand that ‘coming out’ is a process, wherein both the individuals and their families may need to undergo counselling. While some members shared success stories where old friends accepted their identity and invited them for a drink, others referred to fallouts.

Sayan, who has been actively involved with the LGBTQ community in eastern India, broadly defined the closeted individuals who access Facebook Groups into two categories. “Imagine a flowchart diagram, and you write the heading closeted, and you bring out two arrows from there. And one arrow is someone who is suffering... closeted and suffering from internal homophobia. And the other one is closeted and no homophobia.” The first group, according to Sayan, comprised of closeted individuals who were aware of their same-sex attraction or alternate gender and sexual identity, but did not want to be identified as queer. Such closeted individuals used the Facebook Groups to observe and connect with other members. However, in the public domain, they neither accepted their LGBTQ identity nor did they support the community; sometimes they engaged in ridiculing and abusing the queer people to assert their normative identity. Sayan believed, this attitude stemmed from the internalization of

homophobia and the heteronormative structure. As per their observation, such closeted individuals often chose to abide by the widely accepted norms and marry into a heterosexual relationship.

Sayan described the second group of individuals as people who were closeted and did not suffer from any inhibitions regarding the community. They intermingled with the LGBTQ community but chose not to assert their identity for personal reasons. Some may be questioning, unsure, building up the courage to come out, and some may just not feel the need to state their identity. “I am in a glass closet. I am in a closet, but it is made of glass. People, they just tag me as gay, and I just don’t deny. I don’t accept also, but I don’t deny,” said Rakesh when asked about whether he was out as a gender-fluid individual. For the participant, the social perception of his identity did not hold much weight, as was also observed by Sayan when sharing their understanding of the closeted individuals.

The definitions used by Sayan to differentiate between the closeted individuals were broad, and as they added there are multiple ways to categorize the closeted individuals. Interaction with the closeted individuals in the participant pool led to yet another possible category. Similar to Sayan’s definition of the first group, these participants knew and were very sure of their LGBTQ identity but were firm on their decision to never come out as they did not want to hurt their families and friends. Their social relations largely influenced their life and identity, and they were unwilling to compromise in that regard. Referring to herself as “lucky” Niki shared how her parents kept searching for marriage partners for her and it had not worked out so far, but she emphasized that she would rather remain single than share her asexual lesbian identity with her family.

## Indian Society and LGBTQ Community

A factor that keeps coming back in this research is the undeniable impact of the post-colonial socio-cultural system in India that has been dictating the lives of the LGBTQ people. The Indian society's impacts on the queer community can be broadly categorized into two sections – first is the Indian Penal code of Section 377 that provided a legal loophole to the Indian public to consider the LGBTQ individuals as being “unnatural” or “criminal.” Second is the ignorance of the India's rich liberal heritage and the modern suppression of the non-normative sexualities by deeming them as Western imports and thereby against the socio-cultural norm of the society.

**Impact of Section 377.** At the time of this research, the Indian Penal Code of Section 377 was active and therefore all “non-carnal” sexual practices were considered criminal. While technically, the law did not criminalize gay, lesbian or queer individuals particularly, it is evident that people attracted to same-sex individuals cannot engage in procreative sexual practices. Therefore, Section 377 was expressly used to penalize LGBTQ individuals and all non-normative identities were scrutinized by the society and seen as criminal. “I mean we are not illegal. Sometimes I do something, suppose, if I get some girl, maybe some relation (*laughs, embarrassed*) they can take the action of 377 against me. I fear. I never go for relationship *na*. I don't accept relationship” (Bandita, personal communication, March 10, 2015).

While the colonial era law was not the only cause for discrimination against the non-normative sexualities and gender identities in India, it had a significant contribution. The general intolerance towards the community was often addressed in terms of their legal status. The LGBTQ movement in the country therefore was particularly active in addressing the need to

remove the archaic Section 377. It was hoped that the removal of the law would provide the society fewer excuses to not accept the broad range of sexualities and gender identities.

Between 2009 and 2013, the period when IPC Section 377 was read down and again reinstated, numerous LGBTQ individuals chose to come out into the public. It was a phase when the community believed that the society was likely to transform its outlook and attitude. Ramesh was one of the many who came out as a gay man to his family and friends after the 2009 reading down of the Section 377 law by the Delhi High Court. However, in 2013 when the Supreme Court reinstated the Section 377, Ramesh shared how a majority of the activists and the community expected people to go back into the closet, the LGBTQ events to stop and the movement to come to a halt. But the four years of freedom and confidence to come out had empowered a considerable part of the community to continue with their efforts at maintaining their LGBTQ identity, particularly in the large urban centers of Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata. In 2016 another petition was filed to reconsider the decisions about Section 377 and strike down the law. In 2017, the Supreme Court upheld the Indian citizen's right to privacy as a fundamental right. Finally, in 2018 the Indian Supreme Court struck down the part of Section 377 that criminalized non-procreative sexual acts between consenting adults.

Participants in the 2015 interviews argued that Section 377 strengthened the social taboo against LGBTQ members. Ramesh, Williams, Sarah, Sundar, and Sayan, all of whom had been actively engaged in working towards equal rights for LGBTQ members in the country, voiced the fact that Section 377 was a problem per se simply because the public thought the law criminalized homosexuality. The lack of understanding about the law and its nature was analyzed to be one of the biggest reasons for people to assume that the law criminalized homosexuality. It

was argued by most participants that neither the law nor the society should be dictating how anyone chooses to lead their life or the choices they made in terms of their gender and sexuality.

By that same argument, it was also considerably important that the LGBTQ individuals themselves realized the implications of the Section 377 and the possibility of becoming a victim of the law that was widely misused by the larger public (Bhandare, 2014). While there was an observable lack of discussion on the Facebook Groups about the details of the Section 377 law, there was active involvement with the on-ground offline movements surrounding the law. The political scenario with the National Democratic Alliance government had led to much restlessness amongst the community, and there were frequent outbursts. Following the 2015 Dadri incident, where a Muslim family was lynched by a mob for allegedly consuming beef which caused much furor across the country (Chatterjee, 2015), one of the members on LGBT Freedom took to the Group to voice his opinion and call for support. The message against the NDA government was not just about the freedom to consume a food product, but the right to be what they wanted to be. The incident was seen as symbolic of how the society and the state was oppressing and dominating the life choices for its citizens, even though constitutionally India was a democracy.

Within the realms of the Facebook Group, this message was yet another call motivating the Group members to assemble as a community and utilize the collective power to demand their own space. Demanding their constitutional rights to have a legal standing in the country was considered as one of the first steps towards inclusion. The Facebook Groups came across as a platform for mobilizing the community for the social movement seeking social justice, equality and inclusion within the mainstream Indian society.

**Social intolerance.** The Indian society, in general, was argued by all participants to be one which was conservative in terms of sexuality. The participants unanimously perceived the intolerance to be greater against people who identified as gays and lesbians as compared to transgender individuals in modern India. People who identified as transgender found a lot more acceptance and were officially recognized in 2014.

So... yeah, that is the problem with the society because in India, specially, people think if people want to express their opinion uhhh they choose uhh religion for the first, then if the religion allow then they choose according to the society, then they choose according the humanity, and then they choose according to themselves. Soooo this is all natural. Religion and society are actually the second things that actually connect with you after your birth. Humanity and natural stuffs are already in you while you were taking birth, or while you were being created, something like that. So, I think that, that the society should be thinking (of) their opinion, the first thing that they should be thinking about is being human, not being judgmental. Whenever I see some homophobic person or some person who has (a) difference of opinion, I just ask them that exactly which part of my livelihood is affecting your livelihood or your life, in what manner? And that person does not have any answer to this question. (Sarah, personal communication, March 12, 2015)

Being worried about the reactions from family and friends about an individual's non-normative gender and sexual identity is a common fact among the LGBTQ community. The origin of this intolerance in India is uncertain, but what has been reiterated by researchers (Arondekar, 2005; Dasgupta, 2011) and LGBTQ individuals is that its beginning can be traced as far back as to the beginning of the colonial rule. In the post-colonial era however, religion and politics play a powerful role in sustaining the bigotry by categorizing the LGBTQ people and

their lives as against the Indian cultural norm. This in turn results in severe forms of abuse of the LGBTQ citizens of the country.

The most glaring example is that of transgender individuals in the country. Despite being officially recognized as the third gender in 2014, they still have to negotiate the lack of consistency in official documents which are yet to be updated with the revised gender categories; the third gender identity is also limited in terms of property, marriage and child rights; closeted trans individuals further fear family altercations due to an official identity change (Murray, 2016). Following the 2014 judgment, India for the first time saw a transgender individual, Manabi Bandopadhyay, appointed as a college principal in 2015 and the news was shared widely on the Facebook Groups as well. Members met this news with renewed hope for the queer counterpublic. A year and a half later, the college principal submitted her resignation due to alleged non-cooperation and continued agitation perpetrated by the college's teachers and students (PTI, 2016). In May 2017, the Kochi Metro Rail Limited made the headlines with their proposal to employ 23 transgender people into their folds. However, media reports suggested that within a week, 11 of the 23 new employees resigned from their jobs due to gender-based hostility such as being denied proper accommodation near their place of work, or mistreatment such as abuse and ridicule at their workplace (Babu, 2017; Devasia, 2017). These cases are only a few of the many that transgender individuals are still facing in the country. Against that backdrop, there often seems to be little hope for the rest of the LGBTQ spectrum to consider coming out and being openly accepted by the public.

Niki shared a painful recollection of how one of her online friends who identified as a lesbian and was living in a South Indian village came out to her parents, twice. The first time she came out as a queer person, her parents had imposed restrictions on her movement and social

life. The friend waited for five years and then repeated her desire for assuming her non-normative identity; the parents placed her on house arrest and arranged for her marriage to a man. Following the second time Niki lost all touch with her online friend and was unaware of her well-being.

I can tell you right now that if tomorrow Section 377 is wiped out of the Constitution, the Indian Penal Code, struck out, it will definitely... it will not matter at all. Because people who are homophobic will continue to be homophobic. Whether the law is permitting to be in same-sex relationship, or the law is permitting them to be out on the streets, that would definitely not matter at all. If the homophobic people do not change their mindset, nothing can happen. So, implementation of law will not help at all until and unless the mindset changes. (Sayan, personal communication, March 12, 2015)

Due to the social unacceptance of the LGBTQ community by the larger public, problems such as trolling, breach of privacy and also online blackmail have become a prevalent factor. This is a particularly concerning issue for closeted individuals.

### **Disadvantages of the Facebook Groups**

The virtual space of Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ community is limited on the counts of the physical support that it can provide to the queer identifying individuals in India. As noted by the interview participants and observed on the Groups, there are many rural and semi-urban areas that have no physical support organizations in their vicinity. Under those circumstances, LGBTQ individuals who seek a more physical solution to their problems in the form of shelter or intervention are left in a lurch.

Further on, the Facebook Groups sometimes fail to host meaningful conversations among the members. As with any online space where different kinds of information are floated by various individuals, there is a social media noise that overtakes the Groups as well and some of the important topics such as sexual health or LGBTQ rights take a backseat. As noted by Sayan during the interview, from time to time the activists and the admins need to churn the information that has formed a sediment at the bottom of the Groups' timeline. Regrouping and having a conversation on important topics at regular intervals can be beneficial for the Group members, both old and new, as it enables them to remain abreast of the required knowledge and thereby assist in the identity building process.

The privacy issues with Facebook that have been emerging since the US elections in 2016 also bring forth the pertinent question of how safe the platform is for queer identifying individuals; particularly those who are closeted due to social pressures or fear of harassment. Due to the 'closed' or 'secret' settings of the Groups, the memberships were closely monitored by the admins. In spite of that measure, it did not ensure that every member within the Groups were genuinely a part of the community or in support of it. As a result, there were a number of posts on the Groups voicing concerns over the LGBTQ members privacy. The LGBTQ individuals questioned the existence of observably non-queer people on the Groups. The members were rightfully concerned about disguised anti-LGBTQ individuals lurking on the Groups and identifying queer individuals publicly. In one such instance, a member shared an incident where a private conversation with another Group member turned disrespectful and ugly with the latter vehemently opposing to being identified as gay – “oye mae GAY nahi hun samja” (hey, am not gay, do you get it!).

In another instance, a text message-based conversation was shared by a member. The communication seemed to have been initiated from Facebook as the member suggested “fake profiles” being untrustworthy. The texts contained sexually explicit terms wherein the LGBTQ member was being harassed by a stranger. While it could not be ascertained whether the messages came from another existing Group member, sharing such experiences seemed to be a manner of warning other community members about the negative implications that anonymity and social networking carried with itself.

The LGBTQ members were further forced to navigate issues of doxxing or publication of private information on the Internet, trolling on Groups conversations and sexual abuse, stalking or harassment that began with the Groups. Following the reinstatement of Section 377 criminalizing non-procreative sex there were many Internet trolls hounding the queer community.

...there was this group of extremely homophobic people who are like trying their heart out to like poison the entire race [sic]. They used to like come out and hack profiles of gay men and they used to (out) their identity out to the public forum. They used to do all these nonsense things. They used to tell how homosexuals are criminals and they are doing sins and this and that. So, these Groups are also extremely, extremely subjected to subjugation, I can say... You never know that the person who is there in the Group... he can be there in disguise, like he can disguise himself and be in a Group. You will never know if the guy is gay (queer) or not. (Sayan, personal communication, May 27, 2015)

During their interview and sharing their dislike for the platform of Facebook, not in particular the Groups, Sundar shared how some complete strangers would add them as friends. Sundar was open about their gender and sexual identity, and cautious about their online network.

Working on various awareness events for LGBTQ people, they reasoned that it was normal for strangers to befriend them. On one too many occasion however strangers apparently added them just for the purpose of initiating a possible online-offline sexual relationship. Sayan and Rakesh shared similar views on the disadvantages of Facebook and its Groups wherein some of the members are simply looking to find someone to engage with for physical pleasures. According to the participants, these disruptive and abusive behaviors that amount to serious cybercrimes, are however underreported in real-life because the sexual harassment and abuse of LGBTQ people is not taken seriously in the country.

Meanwhile on the Groups, until such incidents take place openly it was found that the administrators and/or moderators had little control over differentiating between genuine LGBTQ people, allies, and anti-LGBTQ members. As a result, it was only after members reported a fellow member for abusive language or harassment could the Group take any action and remove the concerned delinquent.

A concerned Sundar further shared that while he believed that there are definite benefits in terms of networking, promoting events and information, and even starting meaningful conversations, he felt that Facebook's profit-making business model that is dependent upon collecting user data and targeting advertisements based off that information should be a prime concern for the LGBTQ individuals. Congratulating the social networking giant on introducing the numerous gender options for the Facebook users, Sundar raised the question as to what profit did Facebook stand to make from the community.

Attempting to answer his own question, he reasoned that perhaps it was a way to capture the LGBTQ individuals as a part of the Facebook's audience and thereby improve the market. The question led the researcher to take a closer look at the introduction of the gender options by

Facebook. Going back to the initial 2014 launch of the gender options, a post on Facebook Diversity Page said that the company wanted users “to feel comfortable being your true, authentic self.” The post went on to underscore the importance of gender expressions and identity, and according to media reports worked with GLAAD and other LGBTQ organizations to come up with the initial list of 50 optional gender identities (Facebook Diversity, 2014; Griggs, 2014).

The only logical conclusion beyond the fact that Facebook was trying to take a positive and more inclusive step for the social networking platform, is that they wanted to ensure they were tapping into a significant part of the online population. A significant portion of which may be comprised of the queer counterpublic who find solace in being able to build an identity under the shrouds of privacy and anonymity in the virtual world. A part of their 2014 statement also indicated their awareness about the privacy that queer people prefer:

We also have added the ability for people to control the audience with whom they want to share their custom gender. We recognize that some people face challenges sharing their true gender identity with others, and this setting gives people the ability to express themselves in an authentic way. (Facebook Diversity, 2014)

Facebook collects the user information to target its audiences with advertisements that are relevant and personalized, as discussed in Chapter 2. Logging on to the platform on any device, on any browser, invites the social networking giant’s reach into the user’s information on various websites and compromises users’ privacy. In an age where convenience is the key to marketing products, Facebook made it even easier to log in to various sites using their login credentials and further empowered themselves with regard to harvesting the user data for marketing and advertising purposes. Following the US 2016 elections and Cambridge Analytica debacle, which

led to the revelation that 87 million users' information was leaked, it is safe to assume that there are millions more that are yet to be investigated. As stated by Parakilas (2017), even Facebook has no idea about the extent of their data breach.

## **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, the data collected during the cyberethnography period of this research has been extensively detailed. The different kinds of content posted on these Facebook Groups leads to the analysis that with every post and continuous engagement with the virtual community there is another brick added to the process of identity construction, particularly for closeted individuals in the country. As observed earlier, to identify the socially 'abnormal' as being natural could be seen as a first step, particularly for closeted or questioning individuals. Further developing an understanding into the various possibilities by means of group interactions and shared knowledge contributes to framing one's own identity in relation to the group and the society at large. Sharing that understanding in a virtual space is also of crucial importance. The online world provides a space where an individual can choose to remain anonymous, and raise doubts or questions about their own selves, seek clarifications or support, and thereby identify with the space as 'safe.' It can be argued that with increased communication and activity within the Groups, individual members develop a more positive and confident approach towards their group identity. Identifying with the group implies recognizing oneself as a member of that group, and by default as an LGBTQ member or ally or the queer counterpublic. This in turn affirms one's individual identity. The two-way identity building adds to the possibility that Facebook Groups holds for the socio-political changes being called for in the country.

As a collective, this identity as the counterpublic contributes to the political identity of the LGBTQ community and the ongoing social movement for queer rights in India. The

relatively protected venue of Facebook Groups acts as the space within which the LGBTQ members identify themselves as a part of the community by means of participation, and gradually move towards active engagement in debates and discussions, raising awareness and sharing knowledge. All of this contributes to the collective identity and in turn the required political identity.

At this juncture, it is important to state that even though this research investigates the easily accessible space of Facebook Groups, it does not endorse the platform but simply states observations based off empirical research. It is important to consider the replication of the functionality and ease of access of the platform, and perhaps create similar virtual communities on non-profit based platforms to build a better experience for minority communities in sensitive areas.

## Chapter 7: Survey Data Analysis

This chapter provides a detailed exploration of the data gathered through the anonymous web-based survey that was aimed at LGBTQ or queer identifying Indians who used Facebook Groups for LGBTQ community in India. In the following pages, the results for each of the hypotheses and research questions have been explained. A variety of statistical tests were used including Pearson's product-moment correlations, independent samples t-test, one-way between groups ANOVA, Kruskal Wallis Tests, and regression analysis. Non-parametric statistical tests were used in cases where the variable normality was not present. The betas reported in the results are all standardized coefficients. Keeping with the findings from the cyberethnography section of the study, this chapter follows along how the Facebook Group's affordances of privacy and anonymity impacts the members' participation on the virtual Groups. Second, the chapter also reflects upon the findings related to how perceived anonymity and privacy impact identity choices and performances by the survey participants. Third, a regression analysis is used to analyze how the variables of perceived anonymity, participation on Facebook Groups, and other key variables impact Group Identity. Finally, the uses of Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ community are explored and analyzed. The hypotheses and research questions analyses described below do not follow a sequential order, but they have been conceptually organized.

### Sample

The sample (N=134) was 78.4% males, and 21.6% females. The majority of the respondents were within the age group of 18 to 27 years. This is possibly a noteworthy factor since it exhibits that the youth or the generation who were primed towards Internet use from an early age (since the Millennials) were more likely to use the virtual groups in India. The participants reported a wide range of educational diversity (see Table 2), and 91% of the sample

had above post-secondary education. The high level of education may also signify that the Facebook Groups are not yet accessible to less educated LGBTQ identifying individuals.

The majority of the respondents used the English language to take the survey (93.3%). Of the 134 only eight (6%) completed the survey in Bengali language; one participant used the Hindi language survey. Therefore, using native Indian languages did not have much impact on the online survey's response rate. Since most of the survey respondents reported their location to be an urban space (91.8%) and only ten individuals reportedly came from a rural area, it can also be concluded that the online survey did not reach a geographically diverse population. The demographic data, as seen in Table 2, indicates that the sample was skewed towards the young, educated, and urban population, which arguably represent a very small section of the LGBTQ community in India.

**Gender and Sexual Identity.** Participants were requested to identify the gender identity they were most comfortable with. The descriptive data shows that 77 participants identified as male and 23 members selected female. There were 15 participants who identified as gender queer, defined as “an identity commonly used by people who do not identify or express their gender within the gender binary.” Six of the participants identified as transgender people – four of them stated on a follow-up item that they were male-to-female transgender persons, and two people identified as female-to-male transgender persons. One participant chose “prefer not to answer.”

Furthermore, five participants stated they “don't know” their gender identity. In a follow-up item, four of the members stated that they were unsure about their gender identity or were in the process of understanding it. The fifth participant stated they identify as something other than the options that were provided. In total there were eight participants who chose the option of

“something else” and on a follow-up item defined their gender identity in their own words. One participant identified as a non-binary demi girl; one participant stated a confusion between crossdresser and gender-fluid; a third participant’s description of their gender identity suggested a possibility of gender-fluid identity.

From the responses, it seemed as though at least six of the participants were not very clear about the concept of identity and its various categories, such as gender identity, sexual identity, gender expression. For example, participants wrote “bisexual” or “affectionate about both men and women,” which are considered as a sexual identity; “crossdressing” is more about expression than gender or sexual identity. But what is evident is the lack of conformity to the gender binary and the need to identify outside the stated gender categories.

When asked to identify participants’ sexuality or sexual identity, 58.2% of the participants identified as gays or lesbians. There were three individuals who selected heterosexual as their sexual identity. On a closer look, it was found that two of them identified themselves as transgender people, one each in MTF and FTM categories. One individual identified as a crossdresser and thereby chose heterosexual identity. One participant chose not to answer this item, and one person said they “don’t know.” The person who responded that they didn’t know their sexual identity, stated on a follow-up item that they were still in the process of understanding their sexuality.

**Community Identity.** Allowing participants to choose the terminology to define their LGBTQ identity or community was a measure taken to make the survey more personalized. Qualtrics was programmed to insert the participant’s choice in the following survey items, where required. A total of 12 possible LGBTQ identity categories were provided to choose one’s community from; participants could also state their choice in their own words or choose they

“don’t know.” Most of the participants chose to be identified as members of the gay community (32.8%), about 3% (4) chose to be identified as lesbian, and 4.5% (6) chose to be identified as members of the homosexual community. That is 54 individuals to be exact. This is interesting in terms of analysis as in a previous item a total of 78 individuals (58.2%) identified as gay or lesbian, but when asked to choose the community they are most comfortable identifying with, at least 24 individuals chose some other option than gay men or lesbian women. The second most popular choice was the category of LGBTQIA+ with 30 people (22.4%). Queer was chosen by 12.7% (17) of the participants.

Three participants wrote their preferred identity in their own words and it included terms such as “asexual homoromantic,” “human,” and “not belonging to any community.” The last two answers are interesting as they also imply the need to break out of labels and categories for identity building. None of the participants chose to identify their gender or sexual identity using the colloquial terms for the LGBTQ community in India.

**Facebook Groups.** Several survey items were aimed at understanding the participants’ relation and activity on the Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ community in India. The majority of the participants were members in just one to three groups (61.9%,  $n=134$ ); 28 of the participants were members in four to five groups. The rest of the participants (17.2%) were members of more than six Facebook Groups.

When asked about the frequency of browsing through such Groups, 41% ( $n=134$ ) of the survey participants suggested they don’t visit the Groups daily; 26.9% reported that they went through such Groups multiple times a day. In terms of time spent on such Groups, only 14.2% of the respondents indicated that they spent more than an hour on the Groups every day. Most of the survey respondents spent less than 10 minutes (34.3%) and about 30.6% spent anywhere

between 10 to 30 minutes. Browsing durations can be indicative of a person's level of involvement with these virtual communities. No association was found between frequency and duration of time spent on the Groups and respondents' responses to the disclosure of their LGBTQ identity.

The majority of participants (67.2%,  $n=134$ ) reported having joined their first LGBTQ Facebook Group within the past one to three years. This can be due to the increased conversations, awareness, and support organizations around the country over the past decade. Only one participant said they have been a member of LGBTQ Facebook Groups for more than 10 years. When asked about how they were introduced to their first Groups, 50.7% of the participants said they were invited to join the Groups; whereas, 53 (39.6%) participants mentioned that they searched for these Groups. The participants who said they searched for the Groups were further asked two open-ended items about how and why they searched for the Groups. Nearly everyone mentioned that they searched Facebook with keywords. Interestingly these were all English terms such as – LGBT or LGBTQ India, gay (gay kissing, “gey in India”), lesbian, homosexuality, crossdresser, transgender (transgender resources, transgender discussion, transition male to female), queer, and its variations. None of the participants mentioned any colloquial or Indian language term for when they searched for the Groups. Participants also reported that they would search for Groups after hearing about them elsewhere, such as from acquaintances, on websites like *Planet Romeo*, or when looking for established organizations such as Sappho (Kolkata) and Orinam (Chennai). At least one individual stated that they were searching for these Groups because they were “seeking for love.”

The reasons for joining the Groups leads to the analysis that the lack of information, debate, and discussion about queer sexuality in India has given rise to a sense of discontent and

causes depression among many of the LGBTQ identifying individuals. For some, the need for searching out these Groups was mere curiosity; but for others it was a need to know that they were not “alone.” The need for identity reaffirmation not only stems from there being no discussion about queer sexuality, but the social unacceptance that reinforces the silence. The 51 participants’ open-ended responses to their reasons for joining or opening such virtual groups on a popular social networking platform is indicative of their need for searching for both personal and group identity. Some of the reasons reiterated the findings from the first phase of this study, where participants said they were looking for a support system – to provide and be supported; familiarize themselves with the Indian queer community and to connect with “like-minded” people to build a network; in search of love, relationship, sex; searching for a LGBTQ inclusive space; explore queer identities, ideas and grow knowledge and awareness; and to realize they are not alone.

I lived in a small town while schooling, and never got to familiarize myself with concepts as such. Coming to the city, I started to understand my identity and the non-hetero-normative society. I looked up Facebook for LGBT+ groups out of curiosity, to know if LGBT+ people were as frequent in India, as the rest of the LGBT+ visible world. I always feared I was one out of the few hundreds in the country. (Anonymous Survey Respondent, May 9, 2018)

Table 2 Demographic Data of Respondents

Respondent Characteristics	Sample size	Sample Percent
Age	134	
18 to 27 years		61.9%
28 to 37 years		28.4%
38 to 47 years		6.7%
48 to 57 years		3.0%
Education	134	
10th class pass (Secondary Exam/ <i>Madhyamik</i> )		.7%
High school certificate (Higher Secondary/ <i>Uchya Madhyamik</i> )		8.2%
Intermediate or post high school diploma		3.0%
Graduate degree (BA, BSc)		32.8%
Post-graduate degree (MA, MSc, MBA)		37.3%
Professional degrees (Medical, Law, etc.)		11.9%
Doctoral degree and above (Ph.D. and post-doctorate)		6.0%
Gender Assigned at Birth	134	
Male		78.4%
Female		21.6%
Gender Identity	134	
Male		57.5%
Female		17.2%
Gender-queer		11.2%
Transgender person		4.5%
Don't know		3.7%
Prefer not to answer		.7%
Something else		5.2%
Sexual Identity	134	
Heterosexual		2.2%
Homosexual / Gay/ Lesbian		58.2%
Bisexual		14.9%
Pansexual or capable of being attracted to many/any gender(s).		9.0%
Asexual or someone who feels the lack of a sexual attraction, and identifies with this orientation.		3.7%
Queer person [An adjective used by some people, whose sexual orientation is not exclusively heterosexual (e.g. queer person, queer woman).]		9.0%
Questioning		1.5%
Don't know		.7%
Prefer not to answer		.7%
Community Identity	134	
LGBTQIA+		22.4%
Queer		12.7%
Transgender		3.7%
Gender-fluid		3.7%

	Homosexual		4.5%
	Gay		32.8%
	Lesbian		3.0%
	Asexual		.7%
	Bisexual		7.5%
	Pansexual		4.5%
	Cross-dresser		2.2%
	Something else		2.2%
Disclosure of LGBTQ/queer Identity		134	
	Not out at all		8.2%
	Only out to some		56.0%
	Mostly out		29.1%
	Completely out		6.7%
Relationship Status		133	
	In a relationship		24.8%
	Not in a relationship		69.9%
	Prefer not to answer		5.3%
Marital Status		134	
	Married		4.5%
	Not Married		95.5%
Location		134	
	Urban		91.8%
	Rural		7.5%
	Prefer not to answer		.7%
Internet Connection		128	
	Broadband		13.3%
	Wireless or Wi-Fi		32.0%
	Mobile Internet		54.7%

## Hypotheses and Research Question Testing

Multiple one-way ANOVAs, Kruskal Wallis tests, independent sample t-tests, and correlations were run to determine whether any of the demographic characteristics and other descriptive variables had any significant effect on the key dependent variables tested in the research. In cases where significance was found, those variables were controlled for future statistical tests run on the concerned variables.

Testing for differences among participants grouped by their official sex assigned at birth, an independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference on their Active Participation

Scores. Participants assigned male at birth ( $\bar{x} = 4.98$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ,  $n=105$ ) had a significantly different score on Active Participation than females,  $\bar{x} = 4.75$ ,  $SD=2.12$ ;  $t(40.09)=2.43$ ,  $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed). The magnitude of difference in the means (mean difference = 1.05, 95% CI: 0.18 to 1.92) was small (eta squared = 0.04).

The variable measuring participants' level of Disclosure of Identity was broken down into four groups (group 1 = Not out at all; group 2 = Only out to some; group 3 = Mostly out; group 4 = Completely out). A Kruskal-Wallis test revealed a significant difference between the groups on the measure for Identity Performance Scale:  $\chi^2(3, n=129) = 14.66$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . Post-hoc comparisons for Kruskal-Wallis test allowed for pairwise comparison (Dunn test with Bonferroni adjustment). Group 1, that is people who are not out at all, (Md=70) were found to be significantly different from the remaining three groups: group 2 (Md=85), group 3 (Md=91), and group 4 (Md=100). There was no significant difference between group 2, 3 and 4.

The frequency of visits to the Facebook Groups was measured using a four point scale ranging from "I don't browse daily" to "multiple times a day." Its relationship with the key variables were tested using the Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient. There was a statistically significant and moderately positive relationship with the Active Participation variable,  $r = 0.49$ ,  $n = 134$ ,  $p < .001$ . Frequency of visits also had a statistically significant and moderately positive correlation with the Group Identity variable,  $r = 0.40$ ,  $n = 124$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Participants were also asked to estimate the amount of time or duration spent on the groups every day, beginning with less than 10 minutes to more than an hour (five point scale). A Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient test indicated that the variable had a significant correlation with Active Participation. There was a moderately positive correlation between the two variables,  $r = 0.42$ ,  $n=134$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Duration spent on Facebook Groups was

also found to have a moderately positive and statistically significant relationship with the Group Identity variable,  $r=0.40$ ,  $n=124$ ,  $p<.001$ .

Variable measuring whether participants check on Facebook Groups' privacy settings before joining was tested using an independent samples t-test, and significant results were found for the variable of Privacy Importance or the importance of privacy settings for participants. Participants who said they check on Groups' privacy settings ( $\bar{x} = 2.16$ ,  $SD=1.17$ ,  $n=93$ ) had a significantly different score than participants who responded "no",  $\bar{x} = 2.98$ ,  $SD=1.27$ ,  $n=41$ ;  $t(132) = -3.61$ ,  $p=0.00$  (two-tailed). The magnitude of difference in the means (mean difference =  $-0.81$ , 95% CI:  $-1.26$  to  $-0.37$ ) was small (eta squared =  $-0.11$ ).

Internet Access devices where mobile phone was the primary device was tested using an independent samples t-test and a significant result was found on the Group Identity scale. Participants who responded they primarily use mobile phones for internet access ( $\bar{x} = 5.12$ ,  $SD=0.9$ ,  $n=98$ ), had a significant difference score than participants who chose mobile phones as their non-primary device for internet access:  $\bar{x} = 4.35$ ,  $SD=1.37$ ,  $n=26$ ;  $t(30.932)=2.72$ ,  $p=0.01$  (two-tailed). The magnitude of difference in the means (mean difference =  $-0.77$ , 95% CI:  $0.33$  to  $1.22$ ) was small (eta squared =  $0.2$ ).

Further tests were also conducted to check on the variables of age groups, privacy setting importance, education, gender identity, sexual identity, community identity, education, relationship status, marital status, participant location, internet access mediums, number of years since participants first joined a LGBTQ Facebook Groups, knowledge about privacy setting, and knowledge of IPC Section 377. The variables did not have any significant difference or effect on the key dependent variables. For easy reference, the descriptive and demographic variables that

were found significant and need to be controlled for tests focusing upon the dependent variables have been outlined below:

- 1) Active Participation: Official sex, Frequency of visit to Facebook Groups, Duration of visit to Facebook Groups.
- 2) Group Identity Scale: Frequency of visit to Facebook Groups, Duration of visit to Facebook Groups, Internet Access Device.
- 3) Identity Performance Scale: Disclosure of LGBTQ identity.

### **Participation on Facebook Groups**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Facebook Groups are assumed to provide a sense of privacy and perceived anonymity, in part due to their privacy settings that allow for control of membership and content on the Groups, and also because of the general sense of anonymity present in an online communication environment. It is posited in this research that perceived anonymity and sense of privacy contributes towards increased participation on the Facebook Groups, identity performances, and alternate identity choices among the LGBTQ community in India. It is further posited that the Active Participation in turn relates strongly to participants' perception of Group Identity.

**H1:** Participants with access to the Internet over mobile devices will show more active participation than participants with non-mobile devices.

Since the survey was administered online, it can be accepted that all users accessed the Internet in some way. The users were given three choices based on the different types of Internet available in the country - "Broadband (BSNL, Vodafone, Tata, Airtel)," "Wireless or Wi-Fi," "Mobile Internet," "I don't know." The majority of the participants reported using mobile

Internet services (54.7%, n=128, see Table 2). A second item further asked respondents to rank-order the devices that they primarily used for accessing the Internet. The options included “Mobile phone,” “Desktop computer,” “Laptop,” and “Tablets.” Mobile phone was ranked as the first or primary device by 78.4% of the participants (n=131). Laptops were the second most popular device, followed by desktop computers and tablets in the third and fourth places respectively. The cost of mobile communication continues to decline in the country and the mobile data consumption has increased 25 times since 2014 (PTI, 2018). According to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) 2016-17 reports, 32% of the Indian population has access to the Internet. Therefore, it can be assessed that most of the respondents accessed the Internet using their mobile devices. In a separate item, 80.9% of the respondents reported having a Facebook Application on their mobile devices.

Following from the available data on mobile data consumption in the country, the first hypothesis posited that it is due to the easy access to Internet over mobile devices that the LGBTQ community has a high level of active participation on the Facebook Groups. None of the participants reported not using a mobile device. Therefore, it can be assumed that if every participant has a mobile device, then there may be no difference between people who primarily use mobile devices over participants who reported mobile device as their non-primary preference (only one participant ranked mobile device as their fourth preference). However, to draw inferences from the given data, the Mobile Device usage item was categorized into two groups – the first group consisted of people who ranked mobile device as their first preference, and the second group consisted of respondents who did not rank mobile devices as their first preference (see Table 3). The two groups were then compared for differences in their Active Participation on Facebook Groups score. The item testing Active Participation on Facebook Groups asked

participants to report on a Likert scale whether they actively post on the Groups or not ( $\bar{x} = 4.75$ ,  $N = 134$ ). The item was measured using a seven-point Likert scale (where 1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). An independent samples t-test was used to compare the two groups. The test revealed no significant difference in the Active Participation levels of respondents who said they primarily used mobile phones for Internet access ( $\bar{x} = 4.72$ ,  $SD=1.90$ ,  $n=105$ ), than those who chose mobile phones as their non-primary device for internet access:  $\bar{x} = 4.86$ ,  $SD=2.10$ ,  $n=29$ ;  $t(132) = -0.34$ ,  $p=0.73$  (two-tailed). The users of primarily mobile devices had on an average 0.14 points lower on the Active Participation scale than the non-primary mobile users. Therefore, the hypothesis could not be supported.

It is pertinent to note here that not all Facebook Group participants are actively posting on these Groups. As noted in the cyberethnography, many of the group members prefer to simply observe or participate by means of commenting or reacting to posts made by others: they don't post themselves. Therefore, Facebook participation cannot be defined by whether individuals post on the Groups or not. Their nature of participation also has to be taken into consideration.

In a survey item that asked participants about their activity on the Groups, 42.5% ( $n = 134$ ) chose the option "I like to keep myself updated with what people are talking about on such Groups"; 12.7% chose "I do not contribute posts, but I comment on posts made by others." There were 23 participants (17.2%) who identified as "passive observers" implying what virtual ethnographers refer to as lurking or people who just prefer browsing through the Groups. Among the remaining respondents, 37 expressly identified as active participants.

A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to explore the impact of Participation Behavior on Active Participation. The respondents were divided into four groups following from their responses to the item measuring Participation Behavior (group 1: passive observer; group 2:

observing for updates; group 3: commenter; group 4: active poster). There was a statistically significant difference in the Active Participation scores for the four groups:  $\chi^2(3, n=134) = 30.32, p < 0.0005$ . Post-hoc comparisons for Kruskal-Wallis test allowed for pairwise comparison (Dunn test with Bonferroni adjustment), and significant differences could be found between Group 4 or active posters ( $\bar{x} = 6.08, Md=6, SD=1.14$ ) from all the other Groups: passive observers ( $\bar{x} = 3.48, Md=3, SD=1.81$ ); observing for updates ( $\bar{x} = 4.51, Md=5, SD=2.01$ ); commenter ( $\bar{x} = 4.41, Md=5, SD=4.41$ ), as was expected. There were no significant differences between groups 1, 2, and 3. The second group, that is participants who reported that they observe for updates, had the lowest average scores on Active Participation measure. This comparison of the Participation Behavior helps to explore the association between respondents Active Participation level and their nature of participation.

Table 3 Descriptive Data for Test Variables

Variable Description	Sample Size	Sample Percent	Sample Mean	Standard Deviation
<i>Mobile Phone as Primary Device</i>	134			
Primary		78.4		
Secondary		21.6		
<i>Active Participation*</i> “I contribute posts on Facebook Groups”	134		$\bar{x} = 4.75$	1.93
<i>Participation Behavior</i>	134		Md = 2	
I am a passive observer		17.2		
I like to keep myself updated with what people are talking about on such Groups		42.5		
I do not contribute posts, but I comment on posts made by others		12.7		

Doesn't apply to me. I do post on the LGBTQ Facebook Groups.		27.6		
<i>Privacy Importance</i>	134		$\bar{x} = 2.41$	1.26
Do these privacy settings of the Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ or [Insert Community Choice] community hold any significance for you?				
None at all		9.0		
A little		11.2		
A moderate amount		20.1		
A lot		31.3		
A great deal		28.4		
<i>Self-Awareness*</i>	122			
Public: "I am generally aware of myself, my own perspectives and attitudes, when participating in the Facebook Groups."			$\bar{x} = 6.07$	0.96
Private: "In the Facebook Groups, I have often wondered about the way I have responded and presented myself in comparison to others who are similar to me."			$\bar{x} = 4.38$	1.55
<i>Alternate Identity</i>	134		$Md = 2$	0.47
Yes		31.3		
No		68.7		
<i>Identity Performance</i> (measured on a scale of 0 = not at all comfortable, to 100 = very comfortable)	129		$\bar{x} = 81.08$	21.62

Note: \*The item was measured on a seven point Likert scale where 1=strongly disagree, and 7=strongly agree

**H5:** Participants who indicate a high level of perceived anonymity will also indicate high levels of active participation than those who exhibit lower level of perceived anonymity.

The five items measuring Perceived Anonymity were combined into a composite scale ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ,  $\bar{x} = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ,  $n = 129$ , range = 1 to 7) (see Table 1). The item was measured using a seven item Likert scale (where 1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree), where higher score implied high levels of perceived anonymity. The normality tests for the Perceived Anonymity variable indicated deviation from the normal distribution ( $n=134$ ,  $p<.001$ ). On further analysis, the distribution was found to be positively skewed, but it exhibited a reasonable deviation from normality.

The item testing Active Participation on Facebook Groups asked participants to report on a Likert scale whether they actively post on the Groups or not ( $\bar{x} = 4.75$ ,  $SD = 1.93$ ,  $n = 134$ ). The item was measured using a seven item Likert scale (where 1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree), and the variable distribution was negatively skewed, but within reasonable deviation from normality. The relationship between the variables of Perceived Anonymity and Active Participation was investigated using Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient. There was a statistically significant and weak negative correlation between the two variables,  $r = -0.25$ ,  $n=129$ ,  $p<0.01$ . Therefore, the hypothesis was not supported as participants who indicated a high level of Perceived Anonymity, exhibited a lower level of Active Participation by means of posting on Facebook Groups.

Exploring the association between participation and anonymity, a one-way ANOVA was also conducted to test how participants divided by their responses on the variable of Participation Behavior, differed in their scores on the Perceived Anonymity scale. The participants were divided into four groups (group 1: passive observer; group 2: observing for updates; group 3: commenter; group 4: active poster). There was a statistically significant difference between the four groups on their Perceived Anonymity scores,  $F(3,125) = 5.163$ ,  $p<.01$ . Post-hoc tests using

Tukey HSD indicated that group 1 of passive observers ( $\bar{x} = 4.18$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ), had significant mean differences with group 2 ( $\bar{x} = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) and group 4 ( $\bar{x} = 2.76$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ). It is interesting to note here that it is the participants who indicated that they are passive observers who also reported higher perception of anonymity on the Facebook Groups.

**H4:** Those who perceive privacy settings of Facebook Groups to be important will indicate a higher level of active participation on the Facebook Groups aimed at LGBTQ community and allies than those who do not.

During the initial research into the Facebook Groups and from the analysis of the first phase data, the Group's privacy settings were assumed to be an important component of the social networking platform's affordances and a factor that influenced participation on the Groups. Following from that, it was hypothesized that people who indicated they were aware of the privacy settings or placed importance by the settings would be likely to exhibit high Active Participation on the Groups. When asked if respondents were aware of the privacy settings of the Groups feature, 44% of the participants ( $n=134$ ) said they were aware and knew every detail. Among the remaining participants 34.3% knew of the settings but didn't know the details, while 14.9% knew of the settings but did not care to know about the details. Only six participants did not know about the settings at all. Three participants preferred not to answer.

Three other items were asked to gauge the level of importance that participants placed by the Group's privacy settings. While the majority of participants (67.9%,  $n=134$ ) reported that they check the privacy settings before entering such Facebook Groups, 30.6% of the respondents did not explore the settings. When asked about the privacy setting for their favorite LGBTQ Group, 44% said it was secret and 42.5% said it was closed ( $n=134$ ). But there were six

participants who said it was open, and ten participants did not know about their favorite Group's setting.

Participants were also asked, "Do these privacy settings of the Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ or [Insert Community Choice] community hold any significance for you?" To that item, 28.4% ( $n=134$ ) said "a great deal," 31.3% said "a lot," 20.1% said "a moderate amount," 11.2% said "a little," and 9.0% said "none at all" (see Table 3). This item was used to measure the variable Privacy Importance. Looking at the numbers, many participants seemed to lay stress on the importance of the privacy settings of the Facebook Groups. But, there were several participants (20.2%) who considered the Group's privacy settings to be of little or no importance. This implies that privacy and secrecy may not be an important factor for all participants.

The fourth hypothesis predicted that there is some association between the level of importance placed on the privacy settings of the Facebook Groups or Privacy Importance and the level of Active Participation. Hypothetically, it can be argued that the people who found the settings to be important were also more likely to indicate high participation. The relationship between the variables of Privacy Importance and Active Participation was investigated using Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient, but it was not statistically significant, and indicated a weak, positive correlation between the two variables,  $r= 0.16$ ,  $n=134$ ,  $p=.07$ . While this indicates that those who perceived privacy settings as important did show higher participation levels, it was not a statistically significant correlation, so the hypothesis could not be supported.

Following from the initial analyses where the variables of sex, frequency of visit to groups, and duration of time spent on groups, had significant relation with the variable of Active Participation, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was run to determine how much of Active Participation is predicted by Perceived Anonymity, when controlling for the above three variables. Preliminary analysis was conducted to ensure there was no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity. The variables of sex, frequency of visit to groups, and duration of time spent on Groups were entered in the first model, explaining approximately 28% of the variance in Active Participation,  $F(3,125) = 16.04$ ,  $p < .0001$ . It was found that the variable Frequency of Visit was a significant positive predictor of Active Participation and recorded the highest beta value ( $\beta = 0.33$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The variable measuring Duration of Visit was also a significant positive predictor for Active Participation ( $\beta = 0.22$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Therefore, the more a participant visited the Facebook Groups or spent more time on the Groups, their level of Active Participation also increased. Gender was not found to be significant in this model.

In the second model (Table 4), the variable of Perceived Anonymity was entered, and the total variance in Active Participation explained by the model increased to 31%. After controlling for all the other variables, Perceived Anonymity explained an additional 3%, R Square Change = .03, F Change (1,124) = 4.82,  $p < .05$ . The variable of Perceived Anonymity shared a significant negative relationship with Active Participation, ( $\beta = -0.17$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The Frequency of Visit to the Facebook Groups continued to be the most significant variable in the final model ( $\beta = 0.29$ ,  $p < .01$ ), followed by Duration of Visit ( $\beta = 0.23$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Gender was also found to be a significant predictor in the final model ( $\beta = 0.16$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Therefore, it appears that participants who are male, frequent the Facebook Groups more often, spend time on Facebook Groups, and have lower

levels of perceived anonymity are likely to participate by actively posting on the Groups. With the increase in active participation, the individual's perception of anonymity grows lesser, possibly because they make new acquaintances in the groups and feel that they know each other.

Table 4 Summary of hierarchical multiple regression results for Active Participation on Facebook Groups

Variable	<u>Model 1</u>		<u>Model 2</u>	
	b	$\beta$	b	$\beta$
Constant	2.07 (0.47)		2.86 (0.59)	
Male	0.68 (0.36)	0.15	0.72 (0.35)	0.16*
Frequency of visit	0.50 (0.14)	0.33**	0.44 (0.14)	0.29**
Duration of visit (per day)	0.36 (0.15)	0.22*	0.38 (0.15)	0.23*
Perceived Anonymity			-0.22 (0.10)	-0.17*
F Value	16.04		13.60	
F Change			4.82*	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.28		0.31	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.26		0.28	

Notes: \*\*\* p<.0001; \*\* p<.01; \*p<.05.

### Self-Awareness on Facebook Groups

**H6:** Perceived anonymity on the Facebook Groups meant for the LGBTQ identifying members relates to self-awareness within the online space.

Following from the SIDE model studies it was hypothesized that participants who perceive that the Facebook Groups provides anonymity may also exhibit a loss of public self-awareness and enhanced private self-awareness. The perception of self-awareness on the Groups

was measured using a two two-item scale (two for public self-awareness and two for private self-awareness), but the data indicated a lack of internal consistency within the pairs. Therefore, the scale was dropped from analysis. To test the hypothesis, the first item from each subset of the self-awareness scale was considered as a measure. The item for public self-awareness asked participants to state their agreement or disagreement to the statement: “I am generally aware of myself, my own perspectives and attitudes, when participating in the Facebook Groups.” The item was measured on a seven-point Likert scale; it was reverse coded to reflect 1 for low self-awareness and 7 for high self-awareness ( $n=122$ ,  $\bar{x}=6.07$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ).

The Public Self-Awareness variable was significantly negatively skewed ( $-1.220$ , standard error =  $0.219$ ), therefore it was normalized using reflect logarithm transformation. While the distribution continued to be significant on normality tests (Shapiro-Wilk  $<.000$ ), the skewness in the data reduced to  $0.24$ , standard error of  $0.21$ , leading to a reasonably normally distributed data.

A simple linear regression was conducted to test how much of self-awareness can be predicted by the variable of perceived anonymity. It was found that the composite Perceived Anonymity scale ( $\beta=.20$ ,  $p<.05$ ) can predict  $3.9\%$  of the variance in an individual’s level of Public Self-Awareness ( $F(1,120)=4.88$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Given that the variable of self-awareness was reflected, and log transformed for analysis, it can be interpreted as follows: for every unit of increase in the level of perceived anonymity, the individual is likely to experience a decrease in self-awareness by about  $6.5\%$ . This result reaffirms the findings from previous studies (for example, Joinson, 2001; Matheson & Zanna, 1988) that there will be a loss in public self-awareness as perceived anonymity increases in computer mediated communications.

The first item for private self-awareness asked respondents about their level of agreement to the following statement: “In the Facebook Groups, I have often wondered about the way I have responded and presented myself in comparison to others who are similar to me.” Similar to the public self-awareness item, this was also measured on a seven-point Likert scale; it was reverse coded to reflect 1 for low self-awareness and 7 for high self-awareness ( $n=122$ ,  $\bar{x}=4.38$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ). Using simple linear regression, it was found that the composite Perceived Anonymity scale ( $\beta=0.23$ ,  $p<.01$ ) predicted 5.5% of the variance of the Private Self-Awareness variable ( $F(1,120)=6.93$ ,  $p<.01$ ). This finding suggested that for every unit of increase in the level of Perceived Anonymity, an individual’s level of Private Self-Awareness also increased by 0.24 points. There was a significant positive relationship between the two variables. Therefore, even though anonymity reduces one’s level of public self-awareness, that is the concern of being evaluated by others when participating on the virtual Groups, the anonymity also enhances one’s private self-awareness, in terms of individual’s self-introspection in comparison to others, thereby supporting the sixth hypothesis. Since the self-awareness scale could not be used in its entirety, a comparative analysis with previous research is not possible. But this finding indicates that it is possible that while individuals lose inhibitions about presenting their own ideas or perspectives on the Groups and being a part of that public, they also become acutely aware about their identity presentation as they compare themselves with similar members on the virtual Groups and are imbued by the group norms and identity. This can in turn influence the individual’s identity construction process as well.

### **Identity, Anonymity, and Privacy on Facebook Groups**

**H2:** LGBTQ members of Facebook Groups with an alternate profile will exhibit a higher level of perceived anonymity than members who do not have an alternate profile.

The participants were asked if they have a profile based on their alternate identity on Facebook, and the majority responded that they do not have an alternate identity/profile (Yes =42, No = 92, n = 134). The two groups of respondents were then compared on their Perceived Anonymity scores (n=129) using an Independent Samples T-test. There was a small but significant difference in scores between the groups of respondents with an alternate identity profile ( $\bar{x}$  =3.68, SD = 1.45) and those who did not have an alternate profile  $\bar{x}$  =3.12, SD = 1.48;  $t(127) = 1.97$ ,  $p < 0.05$  (one-tailed). Participants who had an alternate identity based profile indicated a higher level of perceived anonymity when compared to participants who did not have an alternate profile, therefore the hypothesis was supported. But the magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = 0.55, 95% CI: -0.001 to 1.10) was small (eta squared = 0.03), following from the guidelines proposed by Cohen (1988, p. 284-287).

**RQ1:** What are the reasons LGBTQ individuals create an alternate identity for their online selves?

The 42 respondents who indicated that they have an alternate identity profile were provided the option to write (in their own words) the reasons for maintaining an alternate identity. Among them 20 participants wrote their reasons. The fear of being judged, harassed, or disowned by family and friends was stated by ten participants. For example, one of the participants shared “want to keep my gay identity a secret to my family, office colleagues & other straight friends.” For some participants it was also to provide a sense of freedom like a no-judgement space: “because it gives me the freedom of expression, to be who I feel to be, without having to justify anything to anyone.” Using alternate profiles to keep their queer identity a secret and private was considered necessary for most of the members who stated that they have an alternate profile. Only two individuals reported that they have an alternate profile, but don’t

use it any longer. Their statements suggested that they are confident about their identity or comfortable with public knowledge of their queer identity: “I used to go through the LGBTQ pages or groups by using my alternate profile but now after becoming economically independent I use by (my) original profile to browse through the pages.” Only one participant wrote that they use the alternate profile to communicate and identify romantic interests.

In addition to the open-ended item the respondents were also given a set of nine items, developed from the cyberethnography data, to further explore the reasons for creating an alternate identity. Measured using a seven-point Likert scale (1=strongly agree, and 7 = strongly disagree), the items asked respondents about their use of alternate identity for reasons such as “freedom to communicate,” “for fear of retaliation” and “violence against (selected choice) community.” Among the nine statements, eight of them recorded an average response between scale point 2 (agree) and 3 (somewhat agree, see Table 4). The statement that the alternate identity is used for a romantic relationship while maintaining their identity private found an average disagreement among the participants ( $\bar{x}=4.7$ ). Many of the interview participants during the first phase of the study had indicated that the alternate identity may be used for romantic relationships, but the survey participants did not agree. From the survey data, it can be assumed that alternate identity profiles are predominantly used by the LGBTQ identifying individuals to first freely communicate using their chosen identity; second, individuals who are not yet out about their chosen identity to their family and friends, for such LGBTQ individuals to keep their official identity private for fear of being discovered.

Table 5 Alternate Identity Reasons

Alternate Identity Reasons “I have an alternate profile because...”	Sample Size (n)	Mean of the Sample*	SD of the Sample
freedom to communicate using my chosen identity	40	2.18	1.57
for fear of retaliation.	40	3.30	2.07
enjoy a no-judgement space for my identity	40	2.73	1.89
worried about the violence against [Insert Community Choice] individuals	40	3.15	2.13
avoid being teased about my identity as a [Insert Community Choice] individual	40	2.68	1.82
worried about being harassed for being a [Insert Community Choice] individual	40	2.58	1.87
want to meet other individuals who are LGBTQ but also want to keep my identity private.	40	2.95	2.06
want to have a romantic relationship but keep my identity private.	40	4.70	2.28
worried about my family and friends discovering my [Insert Community Choice] identity.	40	2.40	1.91

\*Measured on a seven-point Likert Scale of 1 to 7, where 1 means “Strongly Agree” and 7 means “Strongly Disagree”

**H3:** Perceived anonymity on Facebook Groups gives the LGBTQ individual members a space to perform the gender and/or sexual identity they best identify with.

Following from previous studies (eg. Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Miller & Arnold, 2009; Welles, 2007; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008), that emphasize the role of anonymity in the performance of an alternate or chosen identity, this hypothesis posited that perceived anonymity on the Groups will have a positive correlation with the level of comfort that participants express about their identity performance, on the Groups. The Identity Performance scale was measured using a sliding scale of 0 to 100, where 0 means very uncomfortable

performing chosen gender or sexual identity in the virtual Groups, and 100 means very comfortable ( $\bar{x}=81.08$ ,  $SD=21.62$ ,  $n=129$ ): 91.5% of the respondents reported a comfort level between 50 to 100, and 48.1% of the participants provided a score of 90 to 100. The relationship between the Perceived Anonymity and Identity Performance was tested using a linear regression. Since Disclosure of Identity was found to have a significant effect on the variable of Identity Performance Scale in the preliminary analyses, it was introduced into the multiple regression. Controlling for the variable of Disclosure of Identity, the composite Perceived Anonymity scale ( $\beta= - 0.07$ ,  $p=.42$ ) could predict only 0.5% of the variance in an individual's comfort level in Identity Performance ( $F(2,126)=7.14$ ,  $p<.01$ ). For every unit of increase in perceived anonymity, the level of comfort for identity performance decreased for the participants, therefore, the hypothesis could not be supported. The variable Disclosure of Identity was a significant predictor of the variance in Identity Performance Scale ( $\beta=0.29$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

As found in an earlier analysis, the participants who identified as “not out at all” had the lowest median score on the Performance Scale, and a significant difference from all the other three groups of participants who ranged from “out to some” to “completely out.” There was a statistically significant difference in the Perceived Anonymity scale for the four groups as well:  $F(3,125) = 5.70$ ,  $p<.001$ . Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD for the one-way between-groups ANOVA indicated that group 1, individuals who are not out at all ( $\bar{x} = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) and group 2, individuals who were only out to some ( $\bar{x} = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ), had significant mean differences with group 4, people who were completely out about their LGBTQ identity ( $\bar{x} = 1.96$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ). Therefore, it can be assumed from the given data that even though participants who had not disclosed their LGBTQ identity (not out at all) indicated a higher perception of anonymity on the Facebook Groups, they were not very comfortable performing their LGBTQ

identity on the Facebook Groups either. So, the relationship between perception of anonymity and identity performance is influenced by the level of an individual's disclosure of identity.

**H7a.** Those who sense higher levels of perceived anonymity on the Groups are likely to indicate a higher perception of group identity than those who exhibit lower level of perceived anonymity.

Following from the SIDE model, the perceived anonymity in online communication environment can lead to a heightened sense of group identity. The Group Identity variable was measured using 13 survey items (on a seven-point Likert scale, see Table 1) and was subsequently transformed into a composite variable: higher the score, greater the level of group identification. Normality tests for the Group Identity Variable revealed a moderately negatively skewed distribution, but further analysis of the data indicated an acceptable level of deviation from normality. The relationship between Perceived Anonymity and Group Identity was investigated using Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient. The variables shared a weak negative correlation, but it was not statistically significant,  $r = -0.15$ ,  $n=124$ ,  $p=.12$ , therefore the hypothesis could not be supported.

**H7b:** Those who indicate high active participation are likely to exhibit stronger group identity than those who indicate lower level of active participation.

This hypothesis was tested by exploring the relationship between Group Identity and Active Participation on Facebook Groups. The relationship between Active Participation on Facebook Groups and Group Identity (as measured by group identity scale) was investigated using Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient. There was a moderate positive

correlation between the two variables,  $r = 0.43$ ,  $n=124$ ,  $p<0.01$ , thereby lending support to the hypothesized relation. Group Identity and Active Participation shared 21.16% of the variance. The hypothesis that there will be a positive correlation between the two variables of Group Identity and Active Participation on Facebook Groups stems from the argument that participation on the Groups can contribute to increased identification and affirmation with one's social group identity. Individuals who indicated a high level of active participation on the Facebook Groups, also exhibited a higher level of group identity.

Differentiating between the different kinds of participants on the Facebook Groups, a one-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to explore the differences in Group Identity scores by Participation Behavior. The respondents were divided into four groups following from their responses to the item measuring Participation Behavior (group 1: passive observer; group 2: observing for updates; group 3: commenter; group 4: active poster). There was a statistically significant difference among the four groups on their Group Identity scores,  $F(3,120) = 4.72$ ,  $p<.01$ . Post-hoc tests using Tukey HSD indicated that group 1 of passive observers ( $\bar{x} = 4.40$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ), had significant mean differences with group 4 of active participants ( $\bar{x} = 5.4$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ). Therefore, people who are active participants on the Groups are likely to exhibit a higher level of group identity perception.

**RQ4:** To what extent does the importance of privacy settings for participants affect their perception of group identity?

This research explores the idea that if virtual Groups are enabling identity construction, how it is related to the Groups' privacy settings and their importance for the participants. To explore the relationship between Group Identity and Privacy Importance, a test using Pearson's

product-moment correlation coefficient was conducted. There was a weak positive correlation between the two variables that was not statistically significant,  $r = 0.08$ ,  $n=124$ ,  $p=0.35$ . Post-hoc tests were conducted testing between groups differences for respondents who chose open, closed, or secret setting for their favorite groups and their Group Identity level, but there was no significant difference. Therefore, it appears privacy settings of a group may not be an important consideration in building group identity.

**RQ5a:** How does social intolerance affect the Indian LGBTQ community's participation on the Facebook Groups?

**RQ5b:** How does social intolerance affect the Group Identity of the participant members of the Facebook Groups?

How online groups' affordances of perceived anonymity and privacy affect identity construction and performance (alternate identity and identity performance comfort levels) are of prime concern in this research. Within the Indian socio-cultural context, it is also important to consider how the Indian society's acceptance of the LGBTQ community is perceived by the participants. Ten items were developed, based off the findings during the phase 1 of the study, to explore the participants' perceptions about being queer in India. These ten items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale (1=strongly agree, 7=strongly disagree) focused upon the aspects of intolerance, awareness, and acceptance of the LGBTQ population in the country. Four items were reverse-coded, 1=strongly disagree and 7=strongly agree.

Through the ten items it was found that the majority of the participants (71%) believed that IPC Section 377 contributed to the social intolerance in India ( $\bar{x}=5.11$ ,  $SD=1.71$ ,  $n=114$ ,

reversed), and because of the law, the participants (68.4%) found it difficult to express their queer identity ( $\bar{x}=5.08$ ,  $SD=1.87$ ,  $n=114$ , reversed). Participants were also asked if Indian cities were tolerant of the LGBTQ community and the responses averaged out to a neutral position ( $\bar{x}=4.04$ ,  $SD=1.64$ ,  $n=114$ ); in comparison when asked about rural areas tolerance, the majority (72.8%) indicated that they were intolerant of LGBTQ individuals ( $\bar{x}=5.29$ ,  $SD=1.67$ ,  $n=114$ ). Participants (66.7%) further expressed that people in India do not understand the LGBTQ community ( $\bar{x}=4.95$ ,  $SD=1.46$ ,  $n=114$ ), and instead the respondents (87.7%) believed that the general population was most likely to perceive LGBTQ as a western idea ( $\bar{x}=5.71$ ,  $SD=1.24$ ,  $n=114$ , reversed).

The final item in the survey asked the participants to confirm the implications of the Section 377 by identifying the statement that defined the law, which was still in effect at the time the survey was conducted. The participants were given three different statements: 1) The law penalizes anyone who identifies as an LGBTQ or queer individual and engages in sexual acts that are considered “unnatural.” (2) The law only penalizes homosexual individuals if they engage in sexual acts that are considered “unnatural.” (3) The law penalizes everyone irrespective of gender and sexual identity, if they engage in sexual acts that are considered “unnatural.” A fourth option of “none of the above,” and a fifth option was to choose “don’t know.” It was interesting to note that only 73 respondents (64%,  $n=114$ ) correctly identified the implications of Section 377 as statement number three. The rest of the participants either marked “don’t know” (7%) or identified the incorrect statements for the item (29%).

One of the survey items asked participants if they perceived the Indian society to be intolerant towards the LGBTQ community ( $\bar{x}=5.75$ ,  $SD=1.26$ ,  $n=114$ , reversed), and the majority responded to the affirmative (88.6%). This item was used to measure the level of Social

Intolerance as perceived by the survey participants. The variables of Social Intolerance and Active Participation were tested using Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient and there was a very weak positive correlation  $r = 0.03$ ,  $n = 114$ ,  $p=0.76$ , but it was not statistically significant. The variables of Social Intolerance and Group Identity were also tested for association using Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient, and there was a weak positive correlation  $r = 0.15$ ,  $n = 114$ ,  $p=0.10$ , but it was not statistically significant. Therefore, it cannot be assumed based on these data that there is any relation between Active Participation or Group Identity and Social Intolerance as experienced by LGBTQ individuals in India. Furthermore, it was found that participants who identified as closeted (defined here as *not out at all or only out to some*) made up the majority of the participants who either strongly agreed (63.9%) or agreed (82.1%) with the high levels of social intolerance.

Following from the above analyses, it was pertinent to understand how the variables measured in this research were able to predict group identity and to what extent. The exploration of the Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ community as a space to realize one's group identity has been of prime importance, as it can in turn lead to an affirmation of one's own personal identity. In order to explore the relations, a hierarchical multiple regression model was used. In the first step, the variables for Internet Access Device, Frequency of Visit, and Duration of Visit, were introduced, as they were found to have significant relationship with the Group Identity variable. In the second model, the variables of Perceived Anonymity and Items measuring Public and Private Self-Awareness were introduced. Following from the SIDE model, it can be reasoned that Perceived Anonymity and Self-Awareness will affect an individual's Group Identity. In the last and final model, Active Participation was introduced. Preliminary analyses were conducted

to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity.

In model 1, as shown in Table 6, the variables of Internet Access Device, Frequency of Visit, and Duration of Visit, together explained 29% of the variance on the Group Identity Scale,  $F(3, 118) = 15.74, p < .0001$ . In the first model, the variable of Internet access device or the use of mobile device for internet access was statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.30, p < .001$ ). The variable Duration of Visit was also found to be statistically significant and recorded the highest beta value in the model ( $\beta = 0.35, p < .001$ ). The variable for Frequency of Visit was positive, but was not significant. Therefore, the use of mobile devices and spending more than 10 minutes on the Facebook Groups was found to be significant positive predictors for the variance in the Group Identity measure.

The second model added the variables of Perceived Anonymity, Public and Private Self-Awareness, and the model explained 36% of the variance in the Group Identity Scale,  $F(6, 115) = 10.85, p < .001$ . The three variables introduced in the second model explained an additional 7.6% of the variance in the Group Identity measure, after controlling for the variables of Internet Access Device, Frequency of Visit, and Duration of Visit:  $R^2 \text{ change} = .076, F \text{ change}(3, 115) = 4.54, p < .01$ . Among the three variables that were introduced, Perceived Anonymity was a significant predictor of the Group Identity variable ( $\beta = -0.17, p < .05$ ). As found earlier, the two variables shared a negative correlation; for every unit of increase in the perceived anonymity level, the level of group identity decreased. Private self-awareness was also found to be a significant predictor ( $\beta = 0.23, p < .01$ ). The variables of Internet Access Device ( $\beta = 0.24, p < .01$ ) and Duration of Visit ( $\beta = 0.31, p < .001$ ), the latter recording the highest Beta in the model. Public Self-Awareness and Frequency of Visit were not significant predictors of group identity.

This model suggests that an individual who uses a mobile device for Internet access spends more time on the Groups, has an enhanced level of Private Self-Awareness, and lower level of Perceived Anonymity, and will show higher perception of Group Identity.

Table 6 Summary of hierarchical multiple regression results for Group Identity on Facebook Groups

Variable	<u>Model 1</u>		<u>Model 2</u>		<u>Model 3</u>	
	b	$\beta$	b	$\beta$	b	$\beta$
Constant	3.13 (0.29)		2.35 (0.60)		2.18 (0.59)	
Internet Access Device <sup>a</sup> – Mobile	0.78 (0.21)	0.30***	0.63 (0.20)	0.24**	0.67 (0.20)	0.25**
Frequency of visit	0.14 (0.08)	0.17	0.09 (0.08)	0.11	0.03 (0.08)	0.03
Duration of visit (per day)	0.32 (0.08)	0.35***	0.28 (0.08)	0.31***	0.24 (0.08)	0.27**
Perceived Anonymity			-0.12 (0.06)	-0.17*	-0.09 (0.06)	-0.12
Self-Awareness (Public)			0.14 (0.08)	0.13	0.11 (0.08)	0.10
Self-Awareness (Private)			0.15 (0.06)	0.23**	0.11 (0.06)	0.17*
Active Participation					0.14 (0.05)	0.25**
F Value	15.74		10.85		10.96	
F Change			4.54**		7.78**	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.29		0.36		0.40	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.27		0.33		0.37	

Notes: <sup>a</sup> The reference group is “Primary – Non-Mobile.”

\*\*\* p<.001; \*\* p<.01; \*p<.05.

In the final model, the variable of Active Participation was introduced, and it was found to be a statistically significant predictor of Group Identity ( $\beta = 0.25$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The final model explained 40% of the variance in the Group Identity Scale,  $F(7, 114) = 10.96$ ,  $p < .001$ . The variable of Active Participation explained an additional 4.1% of the variance in the Group Identity measure, after controlling for the variables of Internet Access Device, Frequency of Visit, Duration of Visit, Perceived Anonymity, Public and Private Self-Awareness:  $R^2$  change = .041,  $F$  change (1, 114) = 7.78,  $p < .01$ . The variables of Perceived Anonymity, Public Self-Awareness, and Frequency of Visit did not have any statistically significant effect on the Group Identity measure in this model. It is interesting to note that Perceived Anonymity, while it continued to have a negative relation with Group Identity, was no longer a significant predictor of the Group Identity measure after the introduction of the Active Participation variable. The variable of Duration of Visit had a statistically significant effect ( $\beta = 0.27$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Participants who accessed the Internet over their mobile phone was also a significant predictor ( $\beta = .25$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The variable of Private Self-Awareness continued to have a statistically significant effect ( $\beta = 0.17$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Therefore, if an individual accessed the Internet with a mobile device, spent time on the Facebook Groups, had an increased level of private self-awareness, and was actively participating by means of posting on the Groups, then they would have a higher level of Group Identity.

### **Uses of Facebook Groups**

**RQ3:** To what extent do the Facebook Groups provide the LGBTQ individuals with a space for information and knowledge sharing, support, and a space to build a network?

The participants were asked two open-ended items: the first item asked about the various uses of Facebook Groups; the second item asked about the *most important use* of the Facebook

Groups according to them. There was a total of 110 responses to the first item, and 107 responses to the second item. To ascertain the most effective grouping, NVivo was used to group the most common words used in the open-ended responses. Commonly used words such as articles, conjunctions, and words such as “groups” and “others” were filtered out.

The word cloud for the survey item asking participants to share the uses of such Facebook Groups shows that they used the words “community” the most. Other words among the top 20 words used in the responses are “updated, information, sharing, networking, news, connecting, support, events, friends, issues, share, understand, communicating, connect, fun, help, lgbtq, activism, comfortable” as shown in Figure 7. Networking with community members was one of the most commonly cited uses of Facebook Groups: “to connect with other community members and have discussions on issues of common interest.” Some of the participants explained about the use of the Groups for information, news, events, support, advocacy, and some stated all the above together, such as one participant wrote, “advocacy, activism, networking, information-dissemination, jokes, fun.” Eight participants did not share any particular use for the Groups but just wrote that they use it for “fun,” diversion, or “time pass.”



Figure 6: Word Cloud for Uses of Facebook Groups

The word cloud for the survey item asking participants to state the most important use of Facebook Groups for them shows that they used “community” the most. Other words most commonly used include – “sharing, events, information, news, updates, discussions, networking, connecting, creating, express, ideas, peer, updated, awareness, communicate, discussion, event, helping, identity,” as shown in Figure 8. From both the items, it was evident that *community* was an important aspect for the use of Facebook Groups, may it be for networking, communicating, or even just finding support. Apart from that, community also came up in association with sharing information about news, events, advocacy issues, and activism. “The idea of creating an online ‘community’ around identity is very important to me,” wrote one survey participant. The uses of these virtual Groups for the queer community was vast and full of potential, but as pointed out by another participant, that it was fairly limited to a privileged section of the society.

For people of a certain age and socio-economic privilege it is a good way for forming social connections. For others (including people who are experiencing mental distress on account of lgbtiqaphobia [*sic*] or feeling isolated), it can be a way to find peer support and referrals to offline groups and spaces. As a trained peer supporter, I find that FB groups, in addition to mailing lists and websites, can be a good way to find and offer peer support at. (Anonymous Survey Participant, May 3, 2018).



Figure 7: Word Cloud for the Most Important Use of Facebook Groups

Following from the ethnographic inquiry into the uses of Facebook Groups, it was expected that participants would find Groups to provide a space for information and knowledge sharing, networking, and support. In total 15 items were developed from the qualitative data to see whether participants agreed with the uses identified during the cyberethnography. Table 7 provides the means and standard deviations of the variables measuring the various uses – on an average, they were all ranked as “Very important” ( $\bar{x}$  =3.70, n of items=15), measured on a Likert Scale where 1 represents “not at all important” and 5 represents “extremely important.”

The participants found the use of Facebook Groups for “Raising awareness about the legal rights for the LGBTQ community,” “Advocacy for LGBTQ rights in India,” and “Information about LGBTQ events around the country” the most important (Table 7). Testing for reliability as a scale, all the items were found to have a positive correlation and internally consistent ( $\alpha$ =0.916, n=15). If two items were further dropped from the scale, namely items measuring use of Groups for “Information about safe sex” and “Information about medical needs,” the remaining 13 items indicated a higher level of internal consistency ( $\alpha$ =0.921, n=13).

Table 7 Uses of Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ community

Group Uses – Variable Description	Sample Size	Mean of the Sample*	SD of the Sample
Seeking a sense of belonging	114	3.40	1.24
Seeking identity for myself	114	3.17	1.25
Seeking a sense of affiliation in the community	114	3.32	1.14
Seeking support as an [Insert Community Choice] individual	114	3.54	1.25
Communicating with other [Insert Community Choice] members	114	3.62	1.10
Establishing relationship with other members	114	3.33	1.14
Maintaining relationship with other members	114	3.25	1.16
Easy communication with LGBTQ community	114	3.84	1.06
Advocacy for LGBTQ rights in India	114	4.11	1.12
Raising awareness about the legal rights for the LGBTQ community	114	4.20	1.02
Information about local physical meetings of the LGBTQ community	114	3.86	1.19
Information about LGBTQ events around the country	114	4.10	1.02
Information about safe sex	114	3.89	1.29
Information about medical needs	114	3.96	1.22
Information about how to tell friends and family about queer identity	114	3.96	1.10

\*Measured on a five-point Likert Scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means “not at all important” and 5 means “Extremely Important,” all the items were reverse-coded for analysis

Uses of the Facebook Groups can be considered as a significant part of why individuals seek to participate in the virtual Groups. It can also be argued that the uses may have some effect on Group Identity, thereby directly contributing to the identity construction. While the uses of Facebook Groups have been identified on various occasions prior to this research (Cassaniti, Mwaikambo, & Shore, 2014; Pi, Chou, & Liao, 2013; Oliver, Washington, Wittenbridge-Lyles,

Gage, Mooney, and Demiris, 2015), none of the studies were found to be focused upon the LGBTQ or queer community. Therefore, the items employed here to measure the uses of the Facebook Groups had to be analyzed further to determine the underlying structure and refine the scale for further analyses. Conceptually, the items were intended to measure three factors – support provided by the Groups, networking opportunities, and use of the Groups for information and knowledge-sharing. A factor analysis with Promax rotation was run on the 15 items to determine the underlying patterns. Prior to performing the factor analysis, the suitability of data for factor analysis was assessed. There were 114 respondents for this set of 15 items in survey, which led to a sample to item ratio of about 7:1. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was 0.86, above the recommended value of 0.6, and Bartlett’s test of sphericity was found to be significant ( $\chi^2(105) = 1144.404, p < 0.001$ ). The principal components analysis revealed that there were three components or factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 47.65%, 11.96%, and 9.78% of the variance respectively, making a total of 69.38%. An inspection of the screeplot revealed a clear break after the third component. Each factor had an eigenvalue of at least 1. Table 8 shows how the items loaded on the three components with scores of 0.50 or higher in bold.

Interpreting the pattern coefficients (factor loadings), the items loaded substantially on only one component: component 1 had six items, component 2 had six items, and component 3 had three items. The structure matrix indicated overlaps on six items and how they correlated with the extracted factors. For example, the variable “Communicating with other [Insert Community Choice] members” had a strong positive correlation with both component 1 (0.75) and component 2 (0.68). In cases such as this, conceptual reasoning for the variables included and the higher structure matrix values were used to categorize the items into the three components. Component 1 was representative of the items that were intended to measure the

groups' use as a space for networking, providing information and knowledge-sharing.

Component two represented the items intended to measure support as experienced on the virtual groups. Component 3 on the other hand included items that related to information on health and family. Treated as subscales, the three factors were found to be internally consistent (Networking & Information,  $\alpha = 0.89$ ; Support,  $\alpha = 0.88$ , Health and Family,  $\alpha = 0.80$ ).

Table 8 Summary of exploratory factor analysis results for uses of Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ community

Items	Factor Loadings			Structure Matrix		
	Comp 1	Comp 2	Comp 3	Comp 1	Comp 2	Comp 3
<i>Comp 1: Networking and Information</i>						
Information about LGBTQ events around the country	<b>0.95</b>	-0.15	0.03	<b>0.87</b>	0.41	0.28
Raising awareness about the legal rights for the LGBTQ community	<b>0.87</b>	-0.05	0.05	<b>0.86</b>	0.47	0.30
Information about local physical meetings of the LGBTQ community	<b>0.84</b>	-0.15	0.23	<b>0.83</b>	0.40	0.46
Advocacy for LGBTQ rights in India	<b>0.82</b>	-0.03	0.08	<b>0.82</b>	0.46	0.32
Communicating with other [Insert Community Choice] members	<b>0.56</b>	0.40	-0.32	<b>0.75</b>	<b>0.68</b>	0.17
Easy communication with LGBTQ community	<b>0.55</b>	-0.15	-0.08	<b>0.70</b>	<b>0.66</b>	-0.06
<i>Comp 2: Support</i>						
Seeking identity for myself	-0.35	<b>0.96</b>	0.11	<b>0.59</b>	<b>0.82</b>	0.19
Seeking a sense of belonging	-0.10	<b>0.84</b>	0.05	<b>0.63</b>	<b>0.80</b>	0.24

Seeking support as an [Insert Community Choice] individual	-0.04	<b>0.74</b>	0.2	0.40	<b>0.77</b>	0.20
Seeking a sense of affiliation in the community	0.16	<b>0.73</b>	-0.01	0.25	<b>0.78</b>	0.22
Maintaining relationship with other members	0.24	<b>0.66</b>	0.02	0.46	<b>0.77</b>	0.35
Establishing relationship with other members	0.39	<b>0.56</b>	-0.13	<b>0.68</b>	<b>0.76</b>	0.11
<i>Comp 3: Health and Family</i>						
Information about medical needs	0.09	-0.02	<b>0.88</b>	0.34	0.22	<b>0.90</b>
Information about safe sex	-0.04	0.16	<b>0.84</b>	0.31	0.32	<b>0.87</b>
Information about how to tell friends and family about queer identity	0.33	0.10	<b>0.53</b>	<b>0.55</b>	0.50	<b>0.65</b>
Eigenvalue	7.15	1.80	1.46			
Variance explained	47.65	11.96	9.77			
Cronbach's $\alpha$	0.89	0.88	0.80			

Note: Factor loadings over .50 appear in bold.

Using the three factors for measuring the uses of Facebook Groups, a correlation analysis was conducted on the variable of Group Identity. The relationship between the composite measure for Networking and Information and Group Identity was tested using Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient, which indicated a moderate, positive, and statistically significant correlation between the two variables,  $r = 0.48$ ,  $n = 114$ ,  $p < .001$ . Group Identity also shared a significant, moderate, and positive correlation with the composite measure for Support,  $r = 0.68$ ,  $n = 114$ ,  $p < .001$ , and information on Health and Family,  $r = 0.039$ ,  $n = 114$ ,  $p < .001$ . Therefore, all

the uses identified here have a significant positive association with Group Identity, and arguably the uses enhance an individual's group identity on such virtual groups.

It was further of interest to explore if Active Participation had any association with the uses identified here. Using Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient, the relationship between Active Participation and the three uses were conducted separately: the composite measure for Networking and Information shared a weak, positive relationship,  $r = 0.25$ ,  $n=114$ ,  $p < .01$ ; the composite measure for Support shared a moderate, positive relationship,  $r = 0.31$ ,  $n=114$ ,  $p < .001$ ; composite measure for information on Health and Family shared a weak positive relationship,  $r = 0.20$ ,  $n=114$ ,  $p < .05$ .

As a preliminary exploratory analysis into the uses of Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ Community, this study provides grounds for further exploration and creation of scales to measure uses of online groups for the LGBTQ community. One of the limitations in this factor analysis process is the small sample size, due to which the correlation coefficients among the variables may be less reliable and the factors may not be generalizable, as opposed to when testing on a large sample. As cautioned by Osborne and Costello (2004), it is important to consider that factor analysis techniques such as principal components analysis is intended for large-sample sizes. Future studies can test the scale on a larger sample size and help build a more reliable and valid scale for the measurement of uses of online groups for the LGBTQ community.

## **Chapter 8: Discussion**

Identity construction is undoubtedly a complex process. It is not just about identifying one's individual characteristics and behavior that define the person, but also about exploring the various social groups and recognizing similarities to aid in building that personal and social identity. This research aimed at exploring the use of Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ community in India, particularly in terms of identity construction. It drew upon various theoretical constructs such as that of social identity theory, social identity model of deindividuation effects, group conformity theories, and theory of publics and counterpublics, for understanding and investigating the hypothesized relationships and exploring possible answers to the research questions. This dissertation provides an in-depth exploration of how CMC characteristics of anonymity and privacy impact individual participation, identity performances, and group identity formation in virtual communities. The study is situated within the Indian socio-cultural context and takes into account how participants' perception of social intolerances may influence their participation on Groups. Altogether, the research suggests that active participation in such online spaces contributes towards one's group identity formation. The study also identifies the various reasons why individuals seek out creating alternate identities and how factors such as anonymity influence the performance of one's chosen gender and sexual identity.

An exploratory research design allowed for the first phase to investigate and record the various ways that Groups are affecting the LGBTQ community in India: through first-person accounts of members and observation of the Groups themselves. The second phase, on the other hand, enabled the researcher to confirm the initial outcomes from the first phase and further investigate hypothesized relationships that were developed based off past literature and theories. This research structure allowed for a more in-depth understanding of virtual groups wherein the

LGBTQ community in India are communicating and networking and gain their perspective on its effective uses. Before delving further into a discussion of the research findings, it is pertinent to outline the limitations of this study and the role of the researcher.

### **Limitations**

This study took a multi-pronged approach to exploring the online groups, but not without limitations. This research was only able to encapsulate a very small and arguably elite sample from the vast and diverse LGBTQ population that exists in India today. The participants' demographic details indicate that the qualitative interviewees and survey respondents were mostly from urban areas, educated, English-speaking, and relatively young (18 - 36 years). The Indian LGBTQ population goes beyond these parameters and not everyone within the community may use the English language, but perhaps are more comfortable with one of the 22 major Indian languages. According to The World Bank (2018), the rural population of India accounts for 66% of the total country's population, and it is only reasonable to assume that LGBTQ individuals exist within the rural population as well.

Secondly, the lack of permitted access to document and analyze multiple Facebook Groups, the number of interview participants, and the sample size for the survey, was also a limiting factor. Since the data collection took place during the period before Section 377 was read down in India, presumably, many of the individuals who identified as LGBTQ were concerned for their safety and that in turn influenced the participation numbers for each method. Perhaps, data collection post Section 377 would allow for a very different perspective on the uses of Groups and provide grounds for a comparative study in the future. While the smaller sample size was an issue, the different ways in which the Groups were explored provided an exhaustive amount of data for the final analysis.

Third, during the cyberethnography, while no disagreements were recorded in the form of comments or complaints about the study to the administrators or the researcher, the study ran the risk of the participants monitoring their activities on the concerned Groups following the announcement that the online space will be observed for research. The researcher also faced the problem of not being permitted to quote much of the information posted on such Groups. Some users expressed their discomfort with sharing the posts they made on the Groups, and the researcher respectfully stepped away from those posts. None of the Group members expressed any objection to the analysis of the posts. In cases where the researcher was allowed to quote the data, the researcher was faced with the ethical dilemma of protecting the participants' privacy and anonymity over proving the data reliability. This posed a problem for the researcher, as it limited the kind of data that could be used as exemplars for the participant observation. However, using the method of triangulation wherein the information from both interviews and the participant observation were brought together to arrive at the various themes, it is hoped that the data recorded in this research is found to be reliable.

Fourth, both during the cyberethnography and the survey, the diversity of Indian languages had to be taken into consideration. The posts on the Facebook Groups were mostly written in English but there were occasional posts in different Indian languages (India has 22 major languages); few of the members in each observed Group chose to share their thoughts in the language of their choice. Generally, it was found to be shared in the language of Hindi. As an Indian, who is fluent in Hindi and Bengali, the researcher translated and made notes of such posts. Post made in languages other than English, Hindi, and Bengali, were not collected. Similarly, during the survey it was determined that providing Indian language options for the survey may yield higher participation numbers. The survey participants who chose to respond in

Bengali and Hindi also wrote their open-ended responses in the Indian languages; the researcher translated those answers.

Fifth, the interpretations of the findings gathered during the first phase of the study were based on the researcher's individual readings from their subjective position as highlighted in the role of the researcher, presented later in this chapter. According to McKee (2003), the researcher's analysis and understanding of the data may differ from the audience's perception of it and more importantly the producer's intent. However, placing the data within the socio-cultural context, theoretical lenses, recording the various form of engagements, and interpretations shared by the interviewees and the Groups, it is hoped that this study was able to build itself on scientific and reasonable grounds.

The sixth concern was the lack of geographical diversity in the survey data that was collected. During the first phase of the study some of the interview participants such as Williams, Bandita, and Sayan mentioned the active use of Facebook in rural areas by the LGBTQ identifying people. The researcher also observed Group posts made by individuals who identified as coming from different parts of the country. However, in the survey only ten individuals reported their location as rural, which made it difficult to assess the reach of the LGBTQ Facebook Groups in India beyond the urban areas. This limitation is also significant as it highlights the possibility that Facebook Groups in India may not be a popular tool among the LGBTQ identifying individuals in rural India. Unlike Cooper and Dzara (2010) who found that the LGBTQ Facebook Groups in the US provided an initial network for similarly identifying individuals in rural areas, this study cannot draw inferences about the geographical penetration of LGBTQ Facebook Groups in India. But it can be argued that if such Groups were to exist in easily accessible forms and popularized among the community, the virtual communities could

provide a space for the initial network building and information gathering for LGBTQ identifying individuals in rural India.

Finally, one of the primary concerns with this research was protecting the privacy and anonymity of the participants and Facebook Groups that were analyzed. The researcher took extensive measures of removing themselves from the various Groups and deleted all recruitment posts to ensure there is no linkback to the participants or the Groups. The researcher also installed a two-factor authentication system on their Facebook profile to protect it from being breached. However, in the age of the Internet and data leaks, particularly with Facebook, there may be situations which are outside the researcher's control and can lead to breach of privacy. Furthermore, in relation to anonymity, as highlighted by Saunders, Kitzinger & Kitzinger (2015), in qualitative research where the data has been anonymized, there is also the challenge wherein the participant can pose risks to their anonymity. While a researcher is trained to protect the privacy and anonymity of the participants in a research, the participant is not equally prepared, and may share similar description or data as in the research interview with public or semi-public spaces such as a blog. The similarity in the data may lead readers to make a connection between the research participant and the blog author. Saunders, Kitzinger & Kitzinger (2015) suggest alerting the participants to the risks and challenges that they may pose to their own anonymity. The researcher took appropriate measures to alert the Groups and the interview participants about the publication of this dissertation, and the possibility of publishing subsequent research papers, and to avoid self-identifying as participants in the research.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In an ethnographic research form it is pertinent to reflect upon the researcher's positionality with reference to their field. Therefore, in the following paragraph the researcher's

role has been briefly explicated. The researcher grew up in the city of Kolkata, where the first ever Indian Pride Parade took place in 1999. A progressive, intellectual, liberal, and artistic metropolis on the eastern coast of the country, Kolkata was always the city which inspired new ideas: queer activism bore witness to that. This research was influenced by this socio-cultural space within which the researcher spent 27 years of her life. Identifying as a cisgender, heterosexual female who had the privilege of being born into an upper middle class Indian family and received an English medium of education, over the local language of Bengali or Hindi, the researcher was well-aware of her privileges of education and class. However, where the society strongly condemned stepping away from the heteronormative structure, the researcher's education and a liberal upbringing enabled her to step away from her own socio-cultural roots and reflect on it. This reflection particularly shaped up following personal interactions with people who identified as LGBTQ and struggled to identify with their position within the society. Looking for support and group identity, the acquaintances turned to social media. An invitation into one such circle of communication on a social networking site led the researcher to first realize the possibilities that online Groups had for the queer minority in India. Witnessing the changes in communication technologies in India also affected the researcher's interest in conducting this study: from desktops with wires running haywire to small computers fitting the palm; from expensive phone calls to affordable real-time video calls; from face-to-face to FaceTime. Experiencing life both with and without these advancements in communication technologies led the researcher to question the social effects and impacts that the Internet based communication technologies has had, particularly with regard to identity construction for minority groups in India. The findings in this research provide significant support to the researcher's initial reasons for endeavoring to explore the possibilities of virtual groups for

LGBTQ identity construction, which arguably affects the community's fight for social change and justice in the country.

### **Importance of Virtual Groups**

It was argued at the beginning of this research that it is due to the easier and cheaper access to Internet based communication, particularly over mobile devices, that the LGBTQ community is accessing social networking spaces such as Facebook. As expected, more than 50% of the survey participants reported using mobile Internet, followed by the choice of wireless or Wi-Fi options (Table 2). Furthermore, 78.4% of the survey participants identified mobile phones as their primary device for Internet access over other options such as desktop computers, laptops, and tablets. This leads to the conclusion that mobile phone is the predominant mode of accessing the Internet for the sample. This assumption is also supported by reports on the increase in mobile data consumption in the country (PTI, 2018). However, how easy Internet access affects participation on the Facebook Groups is yet another question.

### **Participation**

Participation on online platforms can come in various forms. It can be active participation by means of engaging with the Internet based community; it can also be passive participation whereby the individual chooses to just observe or occasionally engage on the online platform. Participation on the Facebook Groups was a crucial factor for this research as it constituted the basis for studying the effect of these online communities on the participants. During the cyberethnography, it was determined that participants can be categorized into different groups based on their participation behavior. Keeping with previous literature on online participation (Dasgupta, 2017; Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004; Rosenmann & Safir, 2006) there was an observable set of members who could be categorized as observers or "lurkers," people who

chose to observe rather than actively participate on the Groups. Reasons for such silent observation could be many, including but not limited to being shy, wanting to remain anonymous, or familiarizing oneself with the Groups (Miller, 2017; Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004). Some of the users, as identified during the cyberethnography phase with the case of Rakesh, just used the platform to keep themselves updated about the Groups' and LGBTQ community's activities and engage no further. Then there were active members who were either actively posting on the Groups or shared thoughts and comments on posts made by other members. During the cyberethnography, another type of member was identified which was in between active posters and observers. While observers or lurkers in the virtual space are generally assumed to be closeted (Rosenmann & Safir, 2006), the researcher found that many of the observers may be completely out as an LGBTQ person and chose to observe the Groups for some other purposes, such as building their network outside the Group space by identifying potential allies.

Data gathered during the cyberethnography indicated support for the argument that the Facebook Groups' privacy settings and the anonymity lent by the social networking site were potential reasons for LGBTQ individuals to join and participate in the Facebook Groups. Among the three Groups observed by the researcher, there was only one Group with a secret setting at the time of research and it had over 3,000 members. It was found to be the most active Group when compared to the two other Groups which were both closed in setting and varied in Group size: LGBT Freedom had more than 15,000 members, and Rainbow had 249 members. It can be assumed, following from the SIDE model and the social impact theory, that the perceived anonymity lent by the "secret" setting and the group size, influenced individuals' participation on the Groups. Observation of the Groups and conversations with the participants also led to the

question if closeted individuals were more likely to prefer closed, secret, or open groups, as secret groups required a certain amount of familiarity with other members and thereby broke the anonymity. Survey results did not indicate any differences in open, closed, and secret settings preferences for participants who were divided on the basis of their disclosure of LGBTQ identity. But the majority of the survey participants (86.5%) chose secret or closed as their preferred Group’s privacy setting. The survey further showed that the privacy settings held at least a moderate amount of importance for 79.8% of the participants. There was no significant difference between closeted or not closeted participants on their perception of importance for the privacy settings of the Facebook Groups. The presence of individuals who did not know about the settings or did not find them to be important also led to the assumption that privacy settings may not be an important determinant for participation. In fact, the survey participants indicated a similar level of Active Participation irrespective of their perception of Privacy Importance (H4, see Table 9). Therefore, it can be assumed that privacy settings may not be an important consideration for active participation on the Groups.

Table 9 Summary of Hypotheses and Research Questions Results

Hypotheses and Research Questions	Outcomes
H1: Participants with access to the Internet over mobile devices will show more active participation than participants with non-mobile devices.	Not supported. Mobile phone was ranked as the primary device by 78.4% of the participants (n=131). There was no difference in active participation levels between mobile and non-mobile users.
RQ1: What are the reasons LGBTQ individuals create an alternate identity for their online selves?	Alternate identity profiles are predominantly used by the LGBTQ identifying individuals to: (1) freely communicate using their chosen identity and (2) avoid being discovered by family and friends.
H2: LGBTQ members of Facebook Groups with an alternate profile will exhibit a higher level of perceived anonymity than members who do not have an alternate profile.	Supported. Participants with an alternate identity based profile indicated a higher level of perceived anonymity than other participants.

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<p>H3: Perceived anonymity on Facebook Groups gives the LGBTQ individual members a space to perform the gender and/or sexual identity they best identify with.</p>	<p>Not supported. For every unit of increase in perceived anonymity, the level of comfort for identity performance decreased for the participants.</p>
<p>H4: Those who perceive privacy settings of Facebook Groups to be important will indicate a higher level of active participation on the Facebook Groups aimed at LGBTQ community and allies than those who do not.</p>	<p>Not supported. Weak, positive correlation between the importance of privacy settings and active participation, not statistically significant.</p>
<p>H5: Participants who indicate a high level of perceived anonymity will also indicate high levels of active participation than those who exhibit lower level of perceived anonymity.</p>	<p>Not supported. Participants who indicated a high level of perceived anonymity exhibited a lower level of active participation on Facebook Groups.</p>
<p>H6: Perceived Anonymity on the Facebook Groups meant for the LGBTQ identifying members relates to self-awareness within the online space.</p>	<p>Supported. For every unit of increase in the level of perceived anonymity, the individual is likely to experience a decrease in public self-awareness, and an increase in private self-awareness.</p>
<p>H7a: Those who sense higher levels of perceived anonymity on the Groups are likely to indicate a higher perception of group identity than those who exhibit lower level of perceived anonymity.</p>	<p>Not supported. Weak negative correlation between perceived anonymity and group identity.</p>
<p>H7b: Those who indicate high active participation are likely to exhibit stronger group identity than those who indicate lower level of active participation.</p>	<p>Supported. Moderate positive correlation between active participation and group identity.</p>
<p>RQ2: What are the uses of Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ community?</p>	<p>Some of the dominant uses identified were information and knowledge-sharing, networking, and virtual support.</p>
<p>RQ3: To what extent do the Facebook Groups provide the LGBTQ individuals with a space for information and knowledge sharing, support, and a space to build a network?</p>	<p>Survey results indicate support for the Facebook Groups use for networking, information and knowledge-sharing, and support.  Uses of Facebook Groups identified in this study had a significant positive association with group identity and active participation.</p>

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RQ5a: How does social intolerance affect the Indian LGBTQ community's participation on the Facebook Groups?	Weak positive correlation between perceived social intolerance and group identity, not statistically significant.
RQ5b: How does social intolerance affect the Group Identity of the participant members of the Facebook Groups?	Weak positive correlation between perceived social intolerance and active participation, not statistically significant.

While assessing the influence of group size may not have been possible in the survey, as participants may not have known the number of members in each Group they held membership in, the effect of perceived anonymity on the active participation of the group members could be measured. Anonymity in this research was conceptualized as the individual's perception of how unidentifiable they were within the virtual Groups, and how it affected their behavior within the Groups. It was found that perceived anonymity and active participation had an inverse relationship: the LGBTQ members perception of anonymity grew lesser as they made more posts on the Groups (H5, see Table 9). The reasons for perception of anonymity decreasing with more active participation could be because the participants became more visible on the Groups if they made posts; they also made new acquaintances in the Groups and felt their level of anonymity decrease. Comparing the differences between participants based on their behavior, it was found that the respondents who identified as passive observers also noted higher levels of perceived anonymity when compared to the three other categories. This is line with research that identifies that online group participants who are lurkers or observers do so because of anonymity, privacy, and safety (Nonnecke & Preece, 2001). This study shows that the observers have a higher perception of anonymity than active participants in virtual Groups.

The interview participants had indicated that the active participants on the Groups were most likely to identify as closeted or individuals who have not yet disclosed their LGBTQ identity. However, the survey analysis indicated no significant difference on the active participation scores for the Group members on the basis of their levels of disclosure of identity. In other words, disclosure of one's identity was not a significant predictor of active participation on the Groups. The regression analysis suggests that the more an individual frequents a Group and spends time on it, the more likely it is that they will actively participate on the Group, and their level of Perceived Anonymity will be significantly lowered.

During the survey, participants were also asked about how they joined LGBTQ Facebook Groups. There were 53 participants who mentioned searching for the Groups using various English terms related to the LGBTQ community. Sharing their reasons to join these virtual Groups, participants stated the need for support, familiarization with the LGBTQ community in India, exploring queer identities, building networks, searching for relationships, but most importantly realizing that they were not alone. These reasons also reinforced the findings from the first phase of the study that lead to the assumption that participating in such Groups provides a space for reaffirmation of one's identity beyond the normative social constructs.

### **Alternate Identity and Performances**

As noted during the cyberethnography, the possibility of creating a profile according to one's identity on Facebook provided with two outcomes – an alternate identity-based profile and performing one's chosen identity. Online platforms such as Facebook provide a space where people may perform their identity. Following from the theory of social identity, an individual's identity construction is not dependent upon their own realization but also an acceptance of that identity by others. Within the LGBTQ Facebook Groups, an online space dedicated to queer

identifying individuals, this acceptance was akin to social norms. No one was non-normative; being queer was the new normal for the participants in that Group.

The cyberethnography led to two visible forms of alternate identity based profiles on Facebook. In the first kind, the profile had unidentifiable information that left the users perceptibly anonymous for other users; in the second kind, the profiles would have semi-identifiable information, such as the users own images and an alternate name. The second kind was presumably the user's performance of their LGBTQ identity, such as in case of Lakshmi who performed her trans identity on an alternate Facebook profile and accessed various Facebook Groups using the alternate profile.

The cyberethnography phase further allowed an exploration of the possible reasons that individuals chose to create an alternate identity. Conversations with Niki, Harish, Lakshmi, and Sarah led to the understanding that the perception of anonymity accorded by the online space and the sense of control over one's identity played a pertinent role in their choice of creating an alternate profile. Niki, Harish, and Lakshmi used their alternate profile both to protect their LGBTQ identity, and to communicate and network with similarly identifying LGBTQ individuals. For Sarah, the alternate profile was the true expression of their identity. This creation of an alternate identity is in line with Goffman's theory about the presentation of self in everyday life, wherein the alternate identity based profile provides with a stage for presenting one's identity that is different from the individual's social role, and arguably it is possible due to the level of perceived anonymity. The survey analysis also showed that participants who had an alternate identity based profile reported higher levels of perceived anonymity (H2, see table 9), thereby supporting that conclusion. But, the difference on the perceived anonymity level between those with alternate identity based profile and those without was quite small.

The motives for maintaining an alternate identity was also of importance in this study, as it provided an unique opportunity to explore the reasons that most users agreed upon (RQ1). During the cyberethnography, such reasons could only be explored during interviews. Among the 11 interviewees, four individuals used such alternate profiles for communicating and participating on the social networking site. The reasons for maintaining the alternate identity were not all mutually exclusive. While interview participants shared that the alternate identity afforded them a place to perform the identity they chose, the choice was also influenced by a fear of being outed or identified by friends, being trolled by strangers, harassed or teased.

The reasons mentioned during interviews and as surmised from previous literature on LGBTQ lives in India (Krishna, 2010; Mitra, 2010; Mitra & Gajjala, 2008), led to nine items on the survey instrument that specifically asked respondents about their level of agreement with the reasons for maintaining an alternate identity on Facebook. It ranged from the need to communicate freely and enjoying a no-judgment space for one's identity to initiating a romantic relationship. Many of the interview participants had indicated the use of alternate identity and online spaces such as Facebook Groups for seeking out romantic relationships. During the survey, participants were asked about their agreement levels with the nine statements. Participants agreed with most of the statements (Table 5), but they did not show much agreement on the statement that they sought out romantic relationships using their alternate identity based profiles. Among the reasons that found more agreement upon was the "freedom to communicate using my chosen identity," and "worried about my family and friends discovering my identity." Societal and familial pressure have been found to be significant reasons for alternate identity performances in the virtual world (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013).

Following from previous research into identity performances (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Miller & Arnold, 2009), it was further hypothesized that perceived anonymity on the Facebook Groups will contribute towards greater comfort with identity performances (H3). However, this study found evidence to the contrary. It was found that individuals who indicated a high level of perceived anonymity were not comfortable performing their chosen identity on the Groups, but it can be assumed that this performance was influenced by participants' level of disclosure of their LGBTQ identity. The survey analysis indicates that individuals who identified as closeted (defined here as not out at all or only out to some) had a higher perception of anonymity on the Facebook Groups than individuals who indicated they were "completely out"; but at the same time the more closeted a person was the less comfortable they were performing their chosen LGBTQ identity on the Groups. The survey results also contradict the findings from the interviews, wherein participants such as Sarah and Lakshmi shared their personal experiences and comfort of performing their chosen gender and/or sexual identity on the online platform due to their perception of anonymity. Sarah had shared that they were mostly out to their family and friends. But, on the other hand, Lakshmi expressed that she never intended to share her trans identity with her family members and was mostly closeted to friends who did not identify as queer or allies. Perhaps what influenced her decision to perform her trans identity on the online space and the comfort she perceived was also due to the fact that she lived in an urban area and was financially independent; the rest of her family were located in a rural area. In the survey as well, one of the participants explicitly stated how financial independence had made them more confident about their own identity. Factors such as family, individual's geographical location, and their level of financial independence can arguably have

significant effect on an individual's comfort in performing their LGBTQ identity in online spaces as Facebook Groups.

### **Group Identity**

One of the underlying reasons for conducting this research was whether participation on these Facebook Groups affect an LGBTQ individual's identity construction. This research made an attempt at understanding and exploring the possible factors in an online community that can influence an individual's level of identity building, starting with their group identity, which in turn re-affirms their individual identity. Studies following from the SIDE model have found support for how anonymity and group immersion in computer mediated communication environment leads to a heightened sense of group identity. Therefore, it was hypothesized that an individual's perception of anonymity would correlate with group identity (H7a, see table 9). The survey results indicated that the more an individual identified with their group, the lower was their perception of anonymity. Earlier in the analysis it was found that active posters on the Facebook Groups indicated a lower level of perceived anonymity. It was further hypothesized that active participation would positively correlate with group identity (H7b), and it stemmed from the argument that participation on the Groups can contribute to increased identification and affirmation with one's social group identity. As Warner argued in his counterpublic theory, participation within such counterpublics can lead to formation and transformation of individual identity. Therefore, active posters of content on the Facebook Groups were found to positively identify with their groups and exhibit a lower level of perceived anonymity, as opposed to passive observers or inactive participants on the Groups.

Self-awareness in computer mediated communication environments has been a subject of much research, such as, studies on the role of self-awareness in self-disclosure on the Internet

(Joinson, 2001; Misoch, 2015). Deindividuation theory suggests that individuals would lose their self-awareness in the anonymous computer mediated communication environment, or in other words, they will exhibit both reduced public and private self-awareness. However, continued research in the area has shown that (private) self-awareness increases within such virtual group communication environment. Private self-awareness implies an individual's personal feelings about their selves, their values, beliefs, in reference to the environmental cues (Matheson & Zanna, 1988; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). During the survey analysis, data was found to support previous research and the SIDE model's proponents' argument that in a computer-mediated communication environment the private self-awareness of individuals is heightened on the virtual groups. Public self-awareness, which refers to the idea that an individual becomes self-aware about other group members' perception of the individual's behavior on the groups, was found to lower as an individual's sense of perceived anonymity increased (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2002; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). Private self-awareness, alongside anonymity, can be a salient factor affecting group identity as an individual becomes more conscious of their group norms and attitudes.

A regression analysis allowed for an in-depth exploration of how far Perceived Anonymity, Self-Awareness (public and private), and Active Participation, affects participants' Group Identity. The regression analysis also considered the effects of Internet access device, frequency and duration of visit to the Facebook Groups. Active Participation and Private Self-Awareness were found to be a statistically significant predictor of Group Identity. Following from the regression model, it can be concluded based on this data that access to the Internet over mobile devices, the duration of time spent on the Facebook Groups, being aware of oneself in reference to the Group, and active participation behavior by means of posting would lead to an

increased group identity. Following from the social identity theory, identifying one's social group can be empowering as it lends a sense of identity and pride to an individual.

During the cyberethnography, many of the interview participants directed the researcher towards social intolerance within the Indian society as a possible factor that pushes the LGBTQ members to seek out online groups that are easily available, which in turn affects their group identity. Rosenmann and Safir (2006) also identified how the lack of acceptance in the non-virtual world can act as push towards the virtual world. While neither of the correlations with Active Participation and Group Identity were statistically significant, it was interesting to note that the perception of social intolerance shared a positive relationship with both the variables. Therefore, the higher the perception of social intolerance, the more the individuals were likely to participate, and exhibit a heightened sense of group identity. A larger sample size in a future study may yield better conclusions for the relationship between these variables.

### **Uses of Virtual Groups**

Previous research into the uses of Facebook Groups have shown that online communities are used as a knowledge-sharing space (Pi, Chou, & Liao, 2013), an avenue for advocacy and activism (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Marichal, 2013), forming collective identities (Triga & Papa, 2015), socializing, entertainment, self-status, information (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009), and support group (Cooper & Dzara, 2010). During the first phase of the study, an extensive in-depth exploration was conducted into the possible uses of Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ identifying individuals. One of the primary uses identified was the use of the Groups for information and knowledge-sharing. The Groups provided a relatively protected space for the queer counterpublic to come together and discuss the spectrum of identities in terms of gender and sexuality, understand the various identified categories, and in turn recognize their self-

identity. The Internet based Facebook Groups arguably provided a safe space for the LGBTQ individuals. India's social structure is deeply heteronormative, and it has made it difficult for individuals to acquire education on diverse genders and sexualities from within their social groups of family or friends, thereby making virtual Groups a necessity. Discussions observed on the Groups, such as members trying to understand the differences and similarities between transgender individuals, and people who identified as hijras or eunuchs, while other Group members responded patiently to the questions in order to help further a proper knowledge, are evidence of how the Groups can be an effective tool for spreading awareness. This information and knowledge-building added to the process of forming an identity in the face of social adversities and lack of resources. While formal organizations for the LGBTQ community exist in most of the metropolitan cities, for those members of the community who are closeted or questioning, the space of Facebook Groups could be identified as a starting point.

The Groups were also found to provide information on health related issues, spreading awareness about sexually transmitted diseases and HIV, encouraging safe sex practices and regular tests, and further accommodating discussions about procedures for sex reassignment surgeries and LGBTQ friendly doctors in the country. Interacting with similarly identifying members who had undergone procedures for SRS or shared experiences about other related health issues was arguably an important component for many of the LGBTQ members of the Groups as they not only gathered information but were enabled to identify health issues, both physical and psychological, and ways to remedy them. Members were also found to share information about family, marriage, and surrogacy. There is no law against LGBTQ marriage in India, but the Section 377 (at the time of the research) and societal pressures were significant deterrents for many of the queer couples.

The Groups were found to be a space to promote events, both online and offline, encouraging participation by the LGBTQ members to bring together the community. While online events came in the form of photography contests, offline events were varied and ranged from meetings and parties, to organized film festivals and pride parades for the queer community. Pictures from various events would often be shared on the Groups and witnessing such communal support was possibly reaffirming for individuals who were still coming to terms with their LGBTQ identity. Informal physical gatherings outside the virtual environment also led to network-building and enabled LGBTQ individuals to identify with the group.

Networking through Facebook Groups was yet another predominant use of the virtual space by its members. It not only led to friendship, but also allowed members to form professional networks and search for love. Many of the participants in this research stated that their initial intention of joining such Groups was the need to find similarly identifying individuals, to realize that they were not alone. While some of these networks were restricted to their virtual existence, some others would extend into the offline world. It was also interesting to note that despite dedicated dating sites such as Tinder, Grindr, PlanetRomeo, OKCupid, and separate Facebook Groups, the Groups observed in the study saw a significant amount of posts where members sought relationships or explicitly expressed interest in other members. The interview participants suggested that Facebook was a popular choice for many of the LGBTQ members in India to find partners.

The cyberethnography phase led to the conclusion that the easily accessible Facebook Groups were often sought out as a support mechanism. Ramesh, who at the time was also the administrator of one of the Groups and associated with an LGBTQ support organization, identified how some members would share posts that were indicative of their intentions to cause

self-harm. The Group admins and other members would intervene in such cases and through personal communication with the affected member help them to seek counselling for depression. In one case as observed by the researcher, members actively engaged with the affected member's post on the Group and encouraged them to talk with other members, seek counselling, and not to give up. This was found to be quite similar to support group meetings that occur in a face-to-face environment, that allows members to share their grief and find support to rise above the problems.

The support found on Facebook Groups was found to be especially relevant for closeted individuals. Interview participants shared that members who were yet to come out about their LGBTQ identity to anyone often found the Groups to provide motivation; by witnessing similar members share their own experiences of coming out to their family and friends, it was arguably providing strength and support to the closeted individuals. Interview participants had also indicated that it is the primarily closeted LGBTQ members who tend to participate and communicate on the Groups the most. The survey results however did not support this argument, as there was no significant difference between closeted and out members on their level of active participation on the Groups.

The uses identified during the survey research led to 15 items that were employed to measure the importance of using the Groups for information, networking, support. Categorized into three subsets of Information and Networking, Support, and Health and Family, the uses of Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ community were found to have a significant positive correlation with the variables of Group Identity and Active Participation. Therefore, it can be concluded that it is due to the effective use of the virtual groups for the purposes of information, networking and support that individuals are likely to participate in the Groups. Furthermore, the

more important these uses become, the higher is the perception of one's identification with the LGBTQ community. This study also provides grounds for exploring the uses of virtual groups for the LGBTQ community and building measures to better understand the groups functionality for queer identity construction.

During the period of this research and dissertation writing, a similar body of research was found to have been published in Rohit Dasgupta's book *Digital Queer Cultures in India: Politics, Intimacies and Belonging* (2017), where the author explored Facebook Groups alongside other digital spaces such as *PlanetRomeo* and *Grindr*. Dasgupta explored two Facebook Groups in his study: one group started as a platform for organizing physical meetings between queer men in the city of Kolkata (India), and the second group was a community-run space that attracted political debates and discussions, also based in Kolkata. Dasgupta's study takes an in-depth exploratory approach to the virtual groups or in his words "imagined queer communities," and it focuses upon the queer male community, critiques the space from an intersectional perspective of class, gender, and identity, thereby problematizing the concept of community. Although the goal of the current study was significantly different from Dasgupta's work as this research aims at understanding the uses of the Facebook Groups, similar to Dasgupta's findings, this research also recognized the differences that existed within the queer counterpublic and the problem of identifying it as a homogenous group. Discussions on the Groups were reflective of the differences that exist within the Indian LGBTQ community, defined by various axis of social differences, including gender and sexuality, such as class, language, education, gender-roles within LGBTQ relations. One example is, an LGBTQ socializing event that explicitly barred cross-dressing and transgender individuals from the invitation.

Members would often come together to discuss the Indian socio-cultural context, and it was evident in a number of aspects such as when members who struggled with social pressures for conforming to identity norms would seek psychological, albeit virtual, support from other members and highlight the social intolerance. The Groups also saw significant discussion about the problems of engaging in queer relationships within the Indian society and the fear of backlash from the society. Since the research was done before Section 377 was read down, the Groups exhibited instances where the members would share their opinions on how the law was restricting their individual freedom and constitutional rights to express their identity and choose their own way of life. These discussions about LGBTQ rights, equality, and group identity arguably gave rise to a more political identity to the Indian LGBTQ community.

While the reading down of Section 377 has effectively fostered a sense of freedom, the Indian society must undergo significant structural and cultural reforms to provide queer identifying individuals their due respect and space. The visibility gap that currently exists in the Indian society will not change overnight, and for many queer identifying individuals the 2018 repeal of Section 377 has had no effect on their immediate socio-cultural environment as their families or friends ignore or fail to acknowledge the existence of the LGBTQ community (Ghoshal, 2018). Therefore, virtual spaces and groups continue to be pertinent for the queer counterpublic as a space to build an identity that gives rise to more concrete changes in the society. One of the biggest hurdles with regard to changes is the official recognition of different genders and sexualities in India, and civil unions of couples, irrespective of their gender or sexuality. Currently, under Indian laws, while same-sex marriage is not illegal, it is also not legally recognized. As a result, for couples like Manjit and Seerat from Punjab, it has proven to be a challenge in acquiring documents that reflect their marriage and has restricted their access to

various marital provisions such as nominations on life and health insurance, or even getting a passport (Khaira, 2019). Although Indian citizens today have the freedom to express their identity, sexuality, and choose their own way of life, it is only symbolic at this stage.

### **Problematic Facebook Groups**

While this research highlights the various uses of the Facebook Groups for the purposes of identity building, information and knowledge-sharing, support, and networking, the virtual groups also have various disadvantages. Access to such Facebook Groups is limited to a very marginalized population within the LGBTQ community. The digital divide in India is still quite large as only 32% of the Indian population has access to the Internet (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, 2018), and despite having the largest number of Internet users in the world, the majority of the Indian population are yet to adopt Internet based communication. This digital divide is also reflective of the issue of affordance of mobile devices and Internet data packages, regardless of its low cost when compared to other countries, such as the US. Facebook today accommodates 13 Indian languages, but for a country that is multilingual and recognizes 22 major languages and multiple dialects, it can sideline a significant part of the population.

It is also pertinent to recognize that the Groups cannot replace real, physical support that is also required for LGBTQ individuals. Furthermore, the Groups were often found to digress from relevant topics for the community into conversations that were not beneficial to the members, such as public discussions about being infatuated with some other members.

Sometimes the Groups required to be steered in the direction of helpful discussion about LGBTQ rights, advocacy, sensitization, and health by the admins and other active members.

The Group members also identified the problem with trolls and anti-LGBTQ individuals joining the Groups and outing members in the process. Despite the privacy settings of closed and

secret, that require new members to be approved by the admins, it did not prevent situations where the LGBTQ members' privacy had been breached, and members were approached through personal chats and harassed by strangers. The interview participants shared their concerns about the existence of such intolerant individuals on the Facebook Groups and how it made the community vulnerable. This may also be a reason why the privacy settings were not found to have any significant effect on participation or group identity, as the settings did not aid in protecting the group members. It arguably provided a certain level of privacy from the rest of the Facebook network, but the Groups, particularly one's with closed settings were still identifiable and therefore susceptible to being penetrated by disruptive individuals.

Beyond the structural concerns of the Groups, concerns were also raised about Facebook's structural changes such as accommodating gender options for individuals who identify outside the gender binary. Question was what Facebook stood to gain from the change. It can be argued that Facebook took a positive step towards inclusivity, but it is also likely that the gender options enabled the social networking platform to gain more data points on individual members which in turn can aid its targeted advertising strategies.

Jonathan Albright, a professor and award-winning data journalist, provided a critical analysis of the political ads and Groups on Facebook, thereby identifying what he has titled "The Micro-Propaganda Machine" on his Medium blog (Albright, 2018). Albright highlights the presence of foreign managers for US based "influential Facebook pages" and the loopholes within the social networking platform's rules for political ad campaigns. In terms of Groups as well, Albright underscores the presence of seemingly grassroots level organization based Facebook Groups that are managed by sponsors with ulterior motives such as that of influencing opinions through the content shared on the Groups, which can be unreliable information to

conspiracy theories. As highlighted before, content on the Groups are difficult to trace as they stay within those spaces and therefore makes it a preferred space for individuals seeking communication with like-minded people in a private setting. The selective access to these Groups is a problem, according to Albright, as it makes tracking disinformation and the people behind these activities even more difficult. While Albright's concern is more with the influence that Facebook is wielding over the American population ahead of the elections, and bringing about awareness regarding the ways that conspiracies continue to grow behind the computer screens and outside the regular user's knowledge, this problem also has implications for Facebook Groups around the world, including India.

The management of Groups and existence of disruptive organizations' controlled profiles on such Groups is a significant concern for the LGBTQ community and leads back to the point of distrust that participants, in this research, shared about anti-LGBTQ sentiments being distributed within these virtual communities. This brings into question the extent to which these Facebook Groups can be a safe space for disadvantaged and minority population. During the course of this research, the administrators of the various LGBTQ Facebook Groups that the researcher came in contact with were seemingly real people as they not only communicated using their profiles that comprised of their personal and identifying details, but also corresponded with the researcher on various occasions between 2015 to 2019 on topics including the research, LGBTQ activism and social justice. Nevertheless, that does not allay the possibility that LGBTQ Groups, outside this study, may have administrators that may or may not be human or are managed by trolls. While none of the Groups that the researcher explored or connected with during this study were without administrators, as pointed by Albright (2018), there are Groups on Facebook that have been found to exist without any moderators or administrators, or in other

words, there are no individuals responsible for the Group activities. In April 2019, Facebook announced updates that are aimed at curbing the spread of misinformation, including identifying Groups that “repeatedly share misinformation” and controlling the spread of such content, and increased inspection of Group’s moderation when found in violation of rules (Kastrenakes, 2019). Groups continue to be an integral part of Facebook, and as shared by Petersen in her article for BuzzFeed News (2019), it is also sometimes the only reason many individuals still frequent the platform as it provides a sense of community to people from all over the world with shared interests, privacy and control.

## **Conclusion**

Facebook undoubtedly has raised a multitude of questions over the past half a decade – privacy, security, disinformation, lack of accountability. The social networking company that became one of the largest in the field of Internet-based communication services has been held answerable for a number of different acts, including but not limited to, shadow profiles, data breach, disinformation, lack of control. Despite all the issues that have been researched, analyzed, and displayed in front of the public, consumers continue to use the platform and it remains at the top of the list of popular social networking sites (Statista, 2019).

The current study focused upon Facebook as the field of study due to its popularity and ease of access in India. In doing so, this study also highlights how the advent of mobile communication in the country is affecting user participation on online Groups and communities. This participation can range from active participation to passive observation; increased participation and time spent on the Groups have been found to affect an individual’s perception of Group Identity. Social identity theory posits that identifying with a group lends a sense of pride and value for individuals, meanwhile self-categorization theory suggests that individuals

mentally categorize or box people into groups. As expressed by Reicher et al. (2015), this categorization process even though not naturally existing, is simply more functional for social beings. Therefore, by means of participating in the Groups, individuals are also becoming more (private) self-aware by detecting similarities between their own individual identity and their group identity. This participation can reinforce an individual's understanding of their LGBTQ identity as now they are more accepting of the idea that they belong to this community.

While the Group's Privacy Settings – open, closed, secret – did not have any significant effect on individual participation, it was interesting to note that the majority of the research participants identified the preference for a closed or secret setting for the Facebook Groups. This study also lends support to the SIDE model's argument that in an online group environment, an individual does not lose self-awareness as a whole, but rather has a heightened sense of private self-awareness, which in turn reaffirms their group identity. Individuals are more perceptive of their own selves in reference to the group they identify with. Anonymity of the online environment was explored from the participant's point of view in this research, and this perceived anonymity was found to have little effect on active participation in the Groups and no effect on group identity building. However, there can be a number of possible factors that are affecting individual's participation in such online Groups, including their location, economic independence, and physical proximity to family.

The Groups were found to be useful for the purposes of sharing information on important issues such as health concerns for the queer community, advocacy for LGBTQ rights, events that can provide a bridge into more offline networking and community building. It was also found to be a significant support mechanism for the participating members of the queer community in India. Going beyond the mainstream media reports that brought forth the colorful Pride Parades

or news regarding Section 377, the Facebook Groups helped to highlight how plays, movies, documentaries, flash mobs, counseling sessions, book readings were also being organized for sensitizing the society and the community about the LGBTQ concerns. While these contributed to the collective identity and framing of individual identities, it was also a significant source of information for the uninitiated into the world of LGBTQ activities that were underway in India. This identity building through social media platforms such as Facebook Groups, and other spaces such as Yahoo! chatrooms, and email lists, have arguably played a large role in bringing about awareness and support to repeal the Section 377, whereby the community today is not faced with the legal dilemmas. The Indian society is still struggling with the aspect of acceptance and as identified by activists and the LGBTQ community and its allies, it will take time, but change is coming (Ghoshal, 2018). The queer community in India is more visible today and striving to remain so through events, pride parades, and activities that involve the larger society.

It is evident from the findings in this research that LGBTQ individuals create and use alternate identity based profiles on the platform of Facebook for various reasons, ranging from protecting their queer identity to the freedom of expressing themselves as queer. Some users have multiple profiles, but maintaining multiple accounts is against the website's policies. Therefore, this research recommends that while Facebook tightens its security around data and user privacy, and there is an increased need for user identity verification, it should also consider the need for alternate profiles or avatars for various individuals, such as gender and sexual minorities. Facebook's current policies fail to consider that individual users may want private and anonymous profiles on the site; users may also want profiles that allow them to express their identity and be able to communicate safely. Alternate profiles today pose the risk of being misused. But, if the platform makes user identity verification a requirement, builds in better

security around user data and information, and considers building in the feature of allowing individuals to create multiple profiles or avatars from a single account, the use of alternate profiles will not only be controlled but can continue to serve the purposes of minority communities who need privacy. Further research can focus upon building prototypes of such websites.

Facebook Groups at this juncture is symbolic of the safe space that many in the community crave, particularly in the face of the exclusionary nature of the mainstream Indian society. This study therefore makes a significant contribution towards understanding how social media space could be harnessed for putting forward more concrete ideas for the LGBTQ movement, fighting for social inclusion, equality and justice, across the country. Used alongside the existing physical organizations working towards the goal, social media could be the ideal space for advocating, supporting and helping members to identify as LGBTQ, while maintaining their need for privacy and anonymity. Finally, given the controversial nature of how Facebook has been responsible for data leaks and privacy breach, it is important to conclude this dissertation with the cautionary note that while the Groups can be a useful tool for an initial network building process due to ease of access, it is pertinent to consider the drawbacks of such centralized networking giants which sustain their system by user data. Alternative decentralized networks such as Diaspora for social networking and Mastodon for microblogging can be considered as possible options, but even those are not without privacy issues. Further research needs to be conducted to ascertain the various risks and problems of Facebook Groups for LGBTQ individuals and other minority communities. In addition to increased data security and moderation of content available on various Groups, Facebook needs to implement rules that do not allow Groups to exist without unverified administrator profiles. As found in this research,

participation on such Groups can potentially lead to better group identification, which is a crucial part of constructing social identity. Therefore, building a better and more positive platform for the community should be a central concern for social media sites.

## Appendix A

### Consent Form

My name is Sreyoshi Dey, and I am a graduate student at Syracuse University, New York.

I am interested in learning more about the role of Facebook Groups and Pages in identity construction for the LGBTIQ community of India. As a part of the research study, you will be asked a few questions relating to your use of the Facebook Groups and Pages, and your opinion about them and their effects on the LGBTIQ community in general, and you in particular. This will take approximately 45 minutes to 60 minutes of your time. The interview conversation would be recorded by means of an in-built voice recorder in case of telephone interviews, and/or a Skype video recorder in case of an online interview.

I am inviting you to participate in a research study. Involvement in the study is voluntary. This means you can choose whether to participate and that you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Whenever one works with email or the internet there is always the risk of compromising privacy, confidentiality, and/or anonymity. Your confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology being used. It is important for you to understand that no guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the internet by this parties.

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about the research please contact Prof. Carol M. Liebler at [cmlieble@syr.edu](mailto:cmlieble@syr.edu).

I am 18 years of age or older, and I wish to participate in this research study.

I agree/don't agree to have the interview for the research study recorded by the researcher.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of Researcher

## Interview Guide

### Basic Interview Details

Time (both local and IST):

Place (of interviewee):

Form: (Skype or phone)

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

- Biological Sex:
- Gender identity:
- Age:
- Profession:

### Brief about the research to the interviewee:

“This research project proposes to look into how the tools of Facebook Groups, as provided by the social networking site, is playing a role in the LGBTQ community of India. Over the past few years, India has grown into one of the largest users of the Internet and research shows that it has had an effect on communication networks across the country. As a researcher, I would like to know about your experience as a member of the LGBTQ community and user of such Facebook Groups. Your opinion, views and ideas will be highly appreciated and invaluable to this study.”

- a) Internet access: Computer/Phone/Tablet
- b) Internet provider: Mobile communication services/Broadband
- c) On Facebook since (approx.):
- d) Social media usage frequency/intensity:
- e) Do you own a smartphone?
- f) Social media interaction bases: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Other (specify)

g) Member of any LGBTQ Facebook Group or Page? Names.

**In-depth Semi-structure Interview Questions**

- a) There are many Facebook Groups supporting LGBTQ members, if you are a member of any such Group(s), what is your opinion about them?
- b) In what ways do you feel you have benefitted from being a part of this/these Groups?
- c) Have you had any experiences where social media was able to impact the lives of closeted members of the community?
- d) Were those individuals encouraged to come out in the open to their friends and family about their sexuality because of their social media engagement?
- e) The Indian society is still coming to terms with the LGBTQ community and the existence of alternate sexualities. How has that impacted your life?
- f) Have you shared any of your problems, worries or experiences with the Facebook Group members?
- g) Have Facebook Groups changed the dynamics or your understanding about the LGBTQ community? How?
- h) Do you maintain your own official identity on Facebook, that is your real name and gender as in official documents, or do you take the help of an alternate identity?
  - i. Are you aware of anyone personally who maintains a fake profile just to be able to engage in Facebook groups or pages?
- i) How do you think social media can help with the LGBTQ movement in India?
- j) What has been the impact of IPC Section 377 on the community in India?

- k) Have Facebook Groups contributed in any way towards the conversation surrounding  
IPC Section 377?

Thank you for all the valuable information, is there anything else you would like to share before we end?

## Appendix B

### Recruitment Letter for Facebook Groups

Dear (*Facebook group admin name*),

I am writing to you to let you know that the study titled *Facebook Prides: Exploring the role of Facebook Groups among the LGBTIQ community in India* that I was conducting with the cooperation of your Facebook Group and using the methodology of interviews, has emerged to be quite interesting. Consequently I wanted to broaden the study and look into the possibility of researching into the actual content of the Facebook Groups for LGBTIQ members. In order to proceed with the study, as outlined below, I would first like to understand if I have an approval from you, as the representative and group admin of (*Facebook Group name*).

I am inviting (*Facebook Group name*) to participate in a research study. Involvement in the study is entirely voluntary, so you, as the representative of the group, may choose to participate or not. Also you may withdraw your consent from the study at any point of time during the research, following which all and any data pertaining to your Facebook Group will be deleted. The data will typically remain with the researcher for a period of one year.

Continuing along the lines of the earlier study, which seeks to understand the role of Facebook Groups in identity construction for the LGBTIQ community of India, as a part of the research study, I have conducted interviews with various LGBTIQ members who are also members of various Facebook Groups for LGBTIQ members and their supporters. In addition, I would now like to observe your Facebook group (*Facebook Group name*) and analyze the group content.

I understand that the groups which are 'closed' or 'secret' in their setting imply that the contents are private and not meant to be brought outside the group. Keeping the importance of privacy and anonymity in mind, sensitive information will not be recorded. Only content which are pertinent or considered of importance will be recorded in the form of screenshots by me and will be saved on my laptop, while I am in Syracuse, NY, United States. The screenshots will have all identifying names or numbers removed through digital photo editing. The recorded data therefore will not have any link back or identifiers about the group or the group members. The recorded data will then be coded according to its nature and relation with the research. So if I find a number of comments talking about relationships, it will be coded as 'relationships' and the kind of comments will be summarized. Similarly, the content maybe coded as 'identity' - dealing with the dilemma that group members maybe facing, 'information and sensitization' - educational information about the community. The comments will not be quoted in exact at any point of time until and unless it is considered very important. In which case, I will share the comment that I am looking to quote, with you and other group admins if required, and only upon your approval will the content be included in the study.

PFA a letter of cooperation attached with this email. If you are willing to be a part of this research study, I would request you to kindly date and sign the letter of cooperation on a Facebook group letterhead, if any. The letter is simply a template and if required modifications

suiting the group's interests can be made to the letter. Also, I understand that there are multiple group admins, so please discuss with others as well. As you deem important.

Considering the physical distance and lack of infrastructure, in the event that an actual signature cannot be scanned on to the document, I would encourage you to leave behind your name and contact details on the signature line, in order to be contacted at a later point of time for any clarification or authorization reconfirmation.

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about the research please contact Prof. Carol M. Liebler at [cmlieble@syr.edu](mailto:cmlieble@syr.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you have questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, if you cannot reach the investigator, contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at 315-443-3013.

I will eagerly look forward to a response from your end.

Yours truly,

Sreyoshi Dey  
Ph.D. Student  
Syracuse University  
Email: [srdey@syr.edu](mailto:srdey@syr.edu)

### **Letter of Cooperation Draft**

Date

Office of Research Integrity and Protections

Syracuse University

121 Bowne Hall

Syracuse, NY 13244

To Whom It May Concern:

*(Researcher Name)* has requested permission to collect research data from \_\_\_\_\_ through a project entitled *Facebook Prides: Exploring the Role of Facebook Groups and Pages among LGBTIQ Community in India.* I have been informed of the purposes of the study and the nature of the research procedures. I have also been given an opportunity to ask questions of the researcher.

As a representative of Group Name, I am authorized to grant permission to Researcher Name to continue her participant observation of the group, make required notes about the nature of content shared on the group, quote content from the group without any identifiers or link backs, store the data in the form of screenshots for reference purposes until the research is complete. The researcher has agreed to the following restrictions: *The researcher will maintain confidentiality of the group and the group members at all points of time, which includes data analysis and research paper writing, and delete the collected data in the form of screenshots once the research is completed. While quoting data the researcher will not quote any identifying information and will share the quoted content with me. If I do not agree to any particular content from being quoted for the research purposes, the researcher will withdraw and delete the data immediately.*

If you have any questions, please contact me at (phone number).

Sincerely,

(Signature or Name)

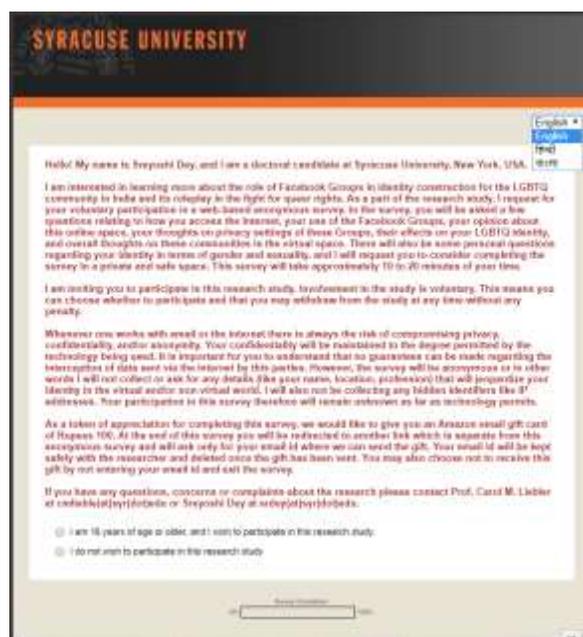
Group admin and founder

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Recruitment Post on Facebook Groups

Hello, my name is Sreyoshi Dey. I am a doctoral candidate at Syracuse University, NY, USA. I am interested in studying the role of Facebook Groups for you - the LGBTQ community of India. I am curious about how such Groups have an effect on your identity building and enable you as an individual. For the purposes of conducting this research I require your voluntary participation in a web-based anonymous survey [anonymous means I will not collect any identifying information like name, location, profession] that will take approximately 10 to 20 minutes of your time. Since the survey may ask some questions, that are personal in nature, I will request you to find a place that is private and safe. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can withdraw from the study at any point of time. However, you must be 18 years of age to take part in the survey. This survey is available in three languages: English, Hindi and Bengali. On clicking the link, you can make your language selection by going to the upper right corner of the screen (as shown in attached picture).



As a token of appreciation for completing this survey, we would like to give you an Amazon email gift card of Rupees 100. At the end of this survey you will be redirected to another link, which is separate from this anonymous survey and will ask only for your email id where we can send the gift. Your email id will be kept safely with the researcher and deleted once the gift has been sent. You may also choose not to receive this gift by not entering your email id and exit the survey.

If interested in furthering our knowledge about the LGBTQ community in India and the role of online spaces such as this Facebook Group, please click on the following link. It is also a sincere request to share this message and link with other members (friends, family, acquaintances) who identify as LGBTQ, are Indian, and use Facebook Groups for the community.

## **Survey Consent Form for Participants**

Hello! My name is Sreyoshi Dey, and I am a doctoral candidate at Syracuse University, New York, USA.

I am interested in learning more about the role of Facebook Groups in identity construction for the LGBTQ community in India and its roleplay in the fight for queer rights. As a part of the research study, I request for your voluntary participation in a web-based anonymous survey. In the survey, you will be asked a few questions relating to how you access the Internet, your use of the Facebook Groups, your opinion about this online space, your thoughts on privacy settings of these Groups, their effects on your LGBTQ identity, and overall thoughts on these communities in the virtual space. There will also be some personal questions regarding your identity in terms of gender and sexuality, and I will request you to consider completing the survey in a private and safe space. This survey will take approximately 10 to 20 minutes of your time.

I am inviting you to participate in this research study. Involvement in the study is voluntary. This means you can choose whether to participate and that you may withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty.

Whenever one works with email or the internet there is always the risk of compromising privacy, confidentiality, and/or anonymity. Your confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology being used. It is important for you to understand that no guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the internet by this parties. However, the survey will be anonymous or in other words I will not collect or ask for any details (like your name, location, profession) that will jeopardize your identity in the virtual and/or non-virtual world. I will also not be collecting any hidden identifiers like IP addresses. Your participation in this survey therefore will remain unknown as far as technology permits.

As a token of appreciation for completing this survey, we would like to give you an Amazon email gift card of Rupees 100. At the end of this survey you will be redirected to another link which is separate from this anonymous survey and will ask only for your email id where we can send the gift. Your email id will be kept safely with the researcher and deleted once the gift has been sent. You may also choose not to receive this gift by not entering your email id and exit the survey.

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about the research please contact Prof. Carol M. Liebler at [cmlieble\(at\)syr\(dot\)edu](mailto:cmlieble(at)syr(dot)edu) or Sreyoshi Dey at [srdey\(at\)syr\(dot\)edu](mailto:srdey(at)syr(dot)edu).

## Survey Questionnaire in English

### *Screening questions:*

1. (If yes) Are you an Indian citizen?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No
2. (If yes) Do you identify as an LGBTQ individual?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No
3. (If yes) Are you currently a resident of India?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No

[A “no” to any of the above questions will automatically disqualify the respondents and thank them for their time, thereby mitigating the possibility of unqualified members of the Facebook Groups to participate in the web-based online survey.]

### *Demographic measures:*

1. What is your age?
  - 18 to 27 years (1)
  - 28 to 37 years (2)
  - 38 to 47 years (3)
  - 48 to 57 years (4)
  - 58 to 67 years (5)
  - 68 years and above (6)

Prefer not to answer (7)

2. What is the highest level of education that you have obtained?

Just literate but no schooling (1)

Primary school certificate (2)

Middle school certificate (3)

10th class pass (Secondary Exam/Madhyamik) (4)

High school certificate (Higher Secondary/Uchya Madhyamik) (5)

Intermediate or post high school diploma (6)

Graduate degree (BA, BSc) (7)

Post-graduate degree (MA, MSc, MBA) (8)

Professional degrees (Medical, Law, etc.) (9)

Doctoral degree and above (Ph.D. and post-doctorate) (10)

Prefer not to answer (11)

3. What sex were you assigned at birth, on your original birth certificate?

Male (1)

Female (2)

Third sex (3)

Don't know (4)

Prefer not to answer (5)

4. Do you currently describe yourself as...

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Gender-queer person (An identity commonly used by people who do not identify or express their gender within the gender binary.) (3)
- Transgender person (4)
- Something else (7)
- Don't know (5)
- Prefer not to answer (6)

4.1 You gave "Don't know" as an answer. Is that because ...

- You don't understand the words. (1)
- You understand the words, but you have not figured out your gender identity or you are in the process of figuring it out (2)
- You mean something else (3)
- Don't Know (4)
- Prefer not to answer (5)

4.2 [If R selects "You mean something else"] Please tell me what you mean by "something else"? (Open ended)

---

4.3. [If R selects Transgender person] Do you consider yourself to be 1. Male-to-female, 2. Female-to-male, or 3. Gender nonconforming?

- Yes, Transgender person, male-to-female (1)
- Yes, Transgender person, female to male (2)
- Yes, Transgender person, gender nonconforming (3)

5. Do you think of yourself to be...

- Heterosexual (1)
- Homosexual / Gay/ Lesbian (2)
- Bisexual (3)
- Pansexual or capable of being attracted to many/any gender(s). (4)
- Asexual or someone who feels the lack of a sexual attraction, and identifies with this orientation. (5)
- Queer person [An adjective used by some people, whose sexual orientation is not exclusively heterosexual (e.g. queer person, queer woman).] (6)
- Questioning (7)
- Something else (8)
- Don't know (9)
- Prefer not to answer (10)

5.1. [If R selects "Something else"] By something else, do you mean that ...

- You have not figured out your sexuality (1)
- You are in the process of figuring out your sexuality (7)

- You do not think of yourself as having sexuality (2)
- You do not use labels to identify yourself (3)
- You made a mistake and did not mean to pick this answer (4)
- You mean something else (5)
- Don't Know (6)

5.2. [For both above questions]: You gave "Don't know" as an answer. Is that because ...

- You don't understand the words. (1)
- You understand the words, but you have not figured out your sexuality or you are in the process of figuring it out (2)
- You mean something else (3)
- Don't Know (4)
- Prefer not to answer (5)

5.3.If R selects "You mean something else"] Please tell me what you mean by "something else"? (Open ended)

---

6. The LGBTQ community is vast and diverse. Please identify the community or terminology you are most comfortable being identified with and would like to be referred with in this survey:

- LGBTQIA+ (1)
- Queer (2)

- Transgender (3)
- Gender-fluid (4)
- Intersex (5)
- Homosexual (6)
- Gay (7)
- Lesbian (8)
- Asexual (9)
- Bisexual (10)
- Pansexual (11)
- Cross-dresser (12)
- Something else (13) \_\_\_\_\_
- Don't know (14)

7. How would you describe your level of “being out” or disclosure of your [Insert selected choice from Q6] identity?

- Not out at all (1)
- Only out to some (2)
- Mostly out (3)
- Completely out (4)
- Prefer not to answer (5)

8. What is your relationship status?

- In a relationship (1)

- Not in a relationship (2)
- Prefer not to answer (3)

9. What is your marital status?

- Married (1)
- Not Married (2)
- Prefer not to answer (3)

10. How would you describe your current location or the place of habitation?

- Urban (1)
- Rural (2)
- Prefer not to answer (3)

### ***Facebook Groups and participation***

The following questions directly relate to your use of Facebook Groups. Please do not confuse this space with Facebook Pages or Facebook Profiles. They are all different parts of the social networking site. For your convenience, the following definition has been provided.

“Groups provide a space to communicate about shared interests with certain people. You can create a group for anything — your family reunion, your after-work sports team, your book club — and customize the group's privacy settings depending on who you want to be able to join and see the group.” – Facebook Help Center.

Facebook Groups can generally be found at “Home” on your Facebook Profile, under “Explore” in the left panel. For mobile devices, tap the “Menu” icon on your Facebook App and

scroll down till you see “Groups.” Please confirm that you understand what Facebook Groups are before proceeding with the survey.

**Note: Answering ‘no’ to the question will exit you from the survey.**

- Yes, I understand the meaning of Facebook Groups and I am a part of such spaces (1)
- No, I don’t think I am a part of any Facebook Groups (2)

11. How did you come across your first Facebook Group for LGBTQ community in India?

- I was invited to join the Group (1)
- I searched for these Groups (2)
- The Groups just appeared as suggestions on my Newsfeed (3)
- I don’t remember (4)
- Prefer not to answer (5)
- Something else (6) \_\_\_\_\_

*11.1* [If R selects option 2 in Q11] If you searched for these Facebook Groups, how did you do it? [open ended]

---

*11.2* [If R selects option 2 in Q11] Why did you search for LGBTQ supportive Facebook Groups? [open ended]

---

12. Approximately, how many Facebook Groups for Indian LGBTQ community are you a member of?

- 1-3 (1)
- 4-5 (2)
- 6-10 (3)
- More than 10 (4)
- Prefer not to answer (5)

13. How many years has it been since you joined the first Facebook Group for the Indian LGBTQ community? (open ended)

- 1 to 3 years (1)
- 4 to 6 years (2)
- 7 to 9 years (3)
- More than 10 years (4)

14. How many times a day do you browse through such Facebook Groups for LGBTQ community in India? (Frequency of visit)

- Multiple times a day (1)
- 2 to 5 times a day (2)
- Once a day (3)
- I don't browse daily (4)
- Prefer not to answer (5)

15. Please select your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statement

pertaining to your participation on the Facebook Groups:

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Somewhat agree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat disagree (5)	Disagree (6)	Strongly disagree (7)
I contribute posts on the Facebook Groups for LGBTQ community in India. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I do not contribute any posts on the Facebook Groups for LGBTQ community in India. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

16. If you don't post on such Facebook Groups ever, what do you do? [To be developed further from the qualitative data]

- I am a passive observer (1)
  - I like to keep myself updated with what people are talking about on such Groups (2)
  - I do not contribute posts, but I comment on posts made by others (3)
  - (Write in your own words) (4)
- 
- Prefer not to answer (5)
  - Doesn't apply to me. I do post on the LGBTQ Facebook Groups. (6)

17. Approximately how much time per day do you spend on such LGBTQ friendly Facebook

Groups? (Duration of visit)

- Less than 10 minutes
- 10 to 30 minutes
- 30 mins to 1 hour
- More than 1 hour
- I don't know
- Prefer not to answer

***Privacy and Facebook Groups***

18. Are you aware of the three privacy settings on Facebook Groups?

- Yes, absolutely, I know every detail
- Yes, I have heard of them but don't know the details
- Yes, I have heard of them but never cared to know the details
- No, never heard of them
- Prefer not to answer

19. When joining a Facebook Group for [Insert selected choice from Q6] community, do you

check on the privacy settings?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

20. What is the privacy setting of your favorite Facebook Group for [Insert selected choice from Q6] community?

- Open
- Closed
- Secret
- I don't know
- Prefer not to answer

21. Do these privacy settings of the Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ or [Insert selected choice from Q6] community hold any significance for you?

- A great deal (1)
- A lot (2)
- A moderate amount (3)
- A little (4)
- None at all (5)

***Anonymity and Facebook Groups***

22. Do you have a Facebook profile with an alternate identity?

- Yes
- No

22.1.[If R selects Yes in Q22] Why do you have a Facebook profile with an alternate identity?

Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements:

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Some what agree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat disagree (5)	Disagree (6)	Strongly disagree (7)
I have an alternate profile for the freedom to communicate using my chosen identity. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have an alternate profile for fear of retaliation. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have an alternate profile to enjoy a no-judgement space for my identity. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have an alternate profile as I am worried about the violence against [Insert selected choice from Q6] individuals. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have an alternate profile to avoid being teased about my identity as a [Insert selected choice from Q6] individual. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have an alternate profile as I am worried about being harassed for being a [Insert selected choice from Q6] individual. (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have an alternate profile as I want to meet other individuals who are LGBTQ but also want to keep my identity private. (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have an alternate profile as I want to have a romantic relationship but keep my identity private. (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

I have an alternate profile as I am worried about my family and friends discovering my [Insert selected choice from Q6] identity. (9)

22.2. You can also write in your own words why do you have an alternate profile on Facebook.

---

23. When you access Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ or [Insert selected choice from Q6] community, do you use your alternate identity or official name and identity?

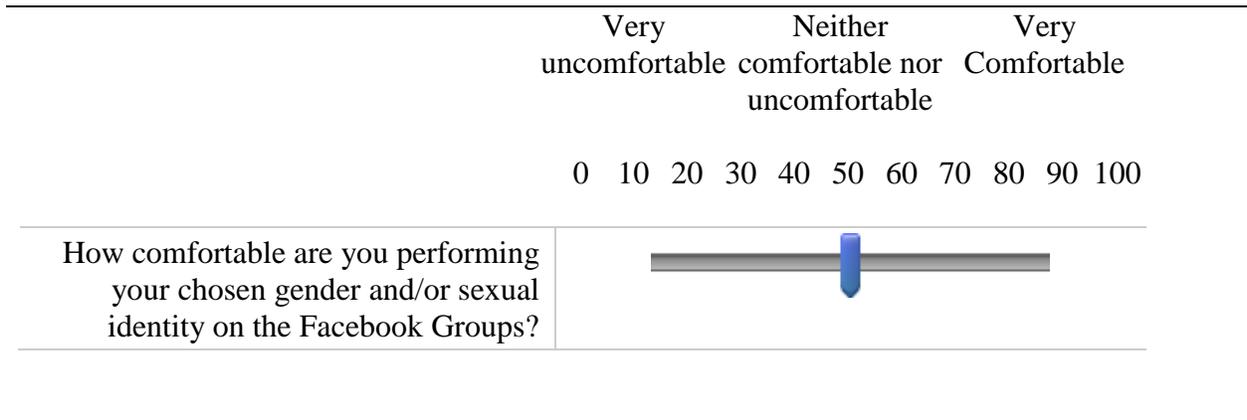
- Alternate profile or my adopted identity (1)
- Official name/identity (2)
- Both alternate and official (3)
- Prefer not to answer (4)

23. When you post on such Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ or [Insert selected choice from Q6] community, which identity do you use?

- Alternate (1)
- Official (2)
- Both (3)
- Prefer not to answer (4)

24. On a scale of 0 to 100 (0 = very uncomfortable and 100 = very comfortable), how comfortable do you feel being yourself or performing your chosen gender and/or sexual

identity on these Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ or [Insert selected choice from Q6] community in India?



25. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements, as they pertain to your official identity when communicating on Facebook Groups for LGBTQ or [Insert selected choice from Q6] community in India:

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Somewhat agree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat disagree (5)	Disagree (6)	Strongly disagree (7)
It is difficult for others to identify me as an individual on these Groups (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am confident that others do not know who I am on these Groups (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I believe that my personal identity remains unknown to others (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am easily identified as an individual by others (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Others are likely to know who I am on these Groups (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My personal identity is known by others on these Groups (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

***Group Identity***

26. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements concerning your thoughts about your membership in the Facebook Groups for LGBTQ or [Insert selected choice from Q6] community in India:

	Strongly Agree (1)	Agree (2)	Somewhat Agree (3)	Neither nor disagree (4)	Somewhat disagree (5)	Disagree (6)	Strongly disagree (7)
I am proud to be a member of the [Insert selected choice from Q6] community (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When someone criticizes the [Insert selected choice from Q6] community, it feels like a personal insult (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I talk about the [Insert selected choice from Q6] community, I usually say “we” rather than “they” (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel that the [Insert selected choice from Q6] community does not care about me (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am proud to be a member of the Facebook Groups for the [Insert selected choice from Q6] community (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel a bond with such Facebook Groups. (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel solidarity with such Facebook Groups. (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have no commitment towards such Facebook Groups. (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am glad to be a member of such Facebook Groups. (9)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think that such Facebook Groups’ members have nothing to be proud of. (10)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It is pleasant to be a member of such Facebook Groups. (11)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Being a member of such Facebook Groups gives me a good feeling. (12)	<input type="radio"/>						
I often think about the fact that I am a member of such Facebook Groups. (13)	<input type="radio"/>						
The fact that I am a member of such Facebook Groups is NOT an important part of my identity. (14)	<input type="radio"/>						
Being a member of this such Facebook Groups is an important part of how I see myself. (15)	<input type="radio"/>						
I have a lot in common with the average member of such Facebook Groups. (16)	<input type="radio"/>						
I am not at all similar to the average member of such Facebook Groups. (17)	<input type="radio"/>						
Such Facebook Group members have a lot in common with each other. (18)	<input type="radio"/>						
Such Facebook Group members are very similar to each other. (19)	<input type="radio"/>						

***Access to the Internet***

27. What kind of Internet connection do you use?

- Broadband (1)
- Wireless or Wi-Fi (2)
- Mobile Internet (3)
- Don't know exactly (4)
- Prefer not to answer (5)

28. What kind of device do you primarily/mostly use to access the Internet now? (Please rank the answers according to your usage. For example, 1 in front of mobile phone if you use it the most, 2 in front of Laptop if that's the second most used device, and so on.)

\_\_\_\_\_ Mobile phone (1)

\_\_\_\_\_ Desktop computer (2)

\_\_\_\_\_ Laptop (3)

\_\_\_\_\_ Tablets (4)

29. Do you have a Facebook Application on your mobile phone?

Yes (1)

No (2)

29.1. Do you use a Facebook Lite Application on your mobile phone?

Yes (1)

No (2)

30. When did you approximately get your first smartphone or mobile phone with Internet access?

1996 - 2000 (1)

2001 - 2005 (2)

2006 - 2010 (3)

2011 - 2015 (4)

2016 - 2017 (5)

- I don't know (6)
- Prefer not to answer (7)

31. How many years has it been since you joined Facebook?

- 9 to 11 years (Facebook became public in 2006) (1)
- 5 to 8 years (2)
- 1 to 4 years (3)
- Less than a year (4)
- I don't know (5)
- Prefer not to answer (6)

### *Self-awareness*

32. When posting anything on these Groups, do you edit or re-write the content?

- Yes, always (1)
- Yes, several times (2)
- Yes, sometimes (3)
- No, not at all. I write the first thing that comes to mind. (4)

33. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements concerning your thoughts about how you feel about yourself when participating in the Facebook Groups for the LGBTQ community [Insert selected choice from Q6] community in India:

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Somewhat agree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat disagree (5)	Disagree (6)	Strongly disagree (7)
I am generally aware of myself, my own perspectives and attitudes, when participating in the Facebook Groups. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often forget to think about my own self in such Facebook Groups, as my mind is distracted by what's going on in these Groups. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In the Facebook Groups, I have often wondered about the way I have responded and presented myself in comparison to others who are similar to me. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

In the Facebook Groups, I have been thoughtful of how well I may get along with other members. (4)	<input type="radio"/>						
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*Use of Facebook Groups*

34. Using single, easy-to-understand terms, what do you use Facebook Groups for?

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35. What uses of Facebook Groups are most important to you?

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36. How important are the following uses of Facebook Groups to you personally?

	Extremely important (1)	Very important (2)	Moderately important (3)	Slightly important (4)	Not at all important (5)
Seeking a sense of belonging (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Seeking identity for myself (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Communicating with other [Insert selected choice from Q6] members (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Establishing relationship with other members (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Maintaining relationship with other members (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Easy communication with LGBTQ community (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Seeking a sense of affiliation in the community (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Seeking support as an [Insert selected choice from Q6] individual (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Advocacy for LGBTQ rights in India (9)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Raising awareness about the legal rights for the LGBTQ community (10)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Information about local physical meetings of the LGBTQ community (11)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Information about LGBTQ events around the country (12)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Information about safe sex (13)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Information about medical needs (14)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Information about how to tell friends and family about queer identity (15)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

37. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Somewhat agree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat disagree (5)	Disagree (6)	Strongly disagree (7)
Majority of the Indian population is intolerant towards the LGBTQ community. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Few people in India are intolerant of the LGBTQ community. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The IPC Section 377 makes Indians intolerant towards the LGBTQ community. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
IPC Section 377 has no impact on LGBTQ community in India. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The social intolerance has nothing to do with the legal status of the LGBTQ identifying individuals. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Major Indian cities are tolerant of the LGBTQ community. (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rural areas in India are tolerant of the LGBTQ community. (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People in India understand the meaning of LGBTQ community. (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People in India think being LGBTQ or non-normative is a Western idea. (9)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
IPC Section 377 has made it difficult to express my [Insert selected choice from Q6] identity (10)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

38. Which of the following statements correctly identifies what IPC Section 377 suggests?

- The law penalizes anyone who identifies as an LGBTQ or queer individual and engages in sexual acts that are considered “unnatural.” (1)
- The law only penalizes homosexual individuals if they engage in sexual acts that are considered “unnatural.” (2)
- The law penalizes everyone irrespective of gender and sexual identity, if they engage in sexual acts that are considered “unnatural.” (3)
- None of the above (4)
- I don’t know (5)

***Incentive***

39. Thanks for completing this survey. Would you like to share your email id with us to receive the Amazon email gift card? You will be redirected to a new survey where you will fill out your email id. The new survey is independent and not related to your responses collected in this anonymous survey.

- Yes, I would like to receive the Amazon Email gift card and share my email id. (1)
- No, I don't want the gift. (2)

[Clicking yes redirects R to a new survey that asks for their email id where they want to receive the gift card]

***Incentive Record***

Thank you for participating and completing the survey. As a token of appreciation for completing this survey, we would like to give you an Amazon email gift card of Rupees 100. Please provide your email id in the space below.

Please rest assured that your email id has no relation with your responses in the main survey as the main survey is completely anonymous. We will ensure to keep your email id safe and delete the id once the gift has been sent.

You may also choose to exit the survey. In that case you don't need to enter your email address.

Thank you again for your valuable time. We hope to share the study with you very soon. If you have any concerns or questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to us. Best wishes.

EMAIL ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

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# Sreyoshi Dey

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## EDUCATION

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### **Ph.D. in Mass Communication** | 2019

*Dissertation*: “Queering Virtual Groups: Exploring Facebook Groups as a space for identity construction and social justice among the LGBTQ community in India”

S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communication  
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

### **Post-Graduate Diploma in Mass Communication** | 2012

Jadavpur University, Kolkata, WB, India

### **Master of Arts in Sociology** | 2011

Jadavpur University, Kolkata, WB, India

### **Bachelor of Arts in Sociology** | 2009

Presidency College, Calcutta University, Kolkata, WB, India  
Minors: Economics and History

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## PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS

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- **Dey, S.** (2019). Let There Be Clamor: Exploring the Emergence of a New Public Sphere in India and Use of Social Media as an Instrument of Activism. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859919827319>.

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## PEER-REVIEWED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

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- **Dey, S.** (October 2017). Exploring the role of social media groups among the LGBTQ community in India. **Panelist** at “Embodied Belongings: Exploring the Politics of ‘Queer’ in South Asia,” South Asia Centre Symposium by Syracuse University and Cornell University. Syracuse, NY.
- White, M., **Dey, S.**, and Badalian, A. (August 2017). Tracing the Emergence and Dominance of Visual Solution Advertising: A Preliminary Study. AEJMC 2017 Annual Conference. Chicago, Illinois.
- **Dey, S.** (May 2017). Let there be clamor - #hokkolorob: Looking at the ‘public sphere’ of social media as an instrument of activism, communication and public opinion formation. *ICA 2017 Annual Conference “Interventions: Communication research and practice.”* San Diego, California.

- **Dey, S.** (August 2016). Queering Facebook: Exploring the role of Facebook groups among the LGBTIQ community in India. *AEJMC Annual Conference 2016*. Minneapolis, Minnesota.
- Borden, J. and **Dey, S.** (June 2016). The effects of screen size and physical proximity on perceptions of risk and hazard. *ICA 2016 Annual Conference “Communicating with Power.”* Fukuoka, Japan.
- **Dey, S.** and Borden, J. (March 2016). Glass ceiling or glass jaw? Gender as Root of Biased Blame Attribution in Contemporary Politics and its Implications for Post-Crisis Image Restoration. *PCA/ACA National Conference 2016*. Seattle, Washington.
- **Dey, S.** (March 2016). Likes, Tweets, Shares for Incredible India: Analysis of the social media marketing practices of the Incredible India tourism campaign. *PCA/ACA National Conference 2016*. Seattle, Washington.
- **Dey, S.** (December 2015). Blackboard to Windows: A case study of Internet use in a non-formal educational institution in a socially and economically deprived section of India. *2nd Regional International Telecommunications Society, India Conference, on Connectivity for All: Future Technologies, Markets and Regulation*. New Delhi, India.
- **Dey, S.** and Osborne, A. (November 2015). ‘Howzat?’: Media usage among South Asian cricket fans in the United States. *North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS) 36th Annual Conference*. Santa Fe, New Mexico.

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## RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

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### **Dissertation Research | Syracuse University**

March 2015 –

*Advisor:* Dr. Carol M. Liebler, Professor of Communications

June 2019

*Research Topic:* Queering Virtual Groups: Exploring Facebook Groups as a space for identity construction and social justice among the LGBTIQ community in India

- A mixed-methods research, the study explored the possibilities that communication over a popular social networking site held for the queer community of India. Findings indicate that active participation on the virtual Groups can contribute to group or social identity building. The research also identified various uses of the Groups including networking, virtual support, information and knowledge-sharing.

### **Graduate Research Assistant | Syracuse University**

May 2016 – August 2016

Assisted Mel White, Assistant Professor of Advertising

*Research Topic:* Tracing the Emergence and Dominance of Visual Solution Advertising

- Employing the method of content analysis, this exploratory study demonstrates the emergence of visual solution advertising due to increased globalization and liberalization of the markets following the European Union and Eurozone formation. This trend set out to build a universal language using visuals that cut across all geographic and cultural boundaries.
- Assisted in the collection of relevant literature, research design, data collection, analysis, and writing the research paper.

- Co-authored a research paper that was presented at AEJMC 2017.

**Graduate Research Assistant | Syracuse University**

May 2015 – April 2016

Assisted Dr. Anne C. Osborne, Professor of Communications

*Research Topic: Media usage among South Asian cricket fans in the United*

*States*

- A qualitative study into the cricket fandom of native South Asians residing in the United States, this research is based upon the theoretical construct of performative sport fandom by Osborne and Coombs (2013).
- Assisted in the research design and collection of data by means of semi-structured interviews with participants. Interviews were conducted in person, over phone or Skype. Transcribed, coded, and assisted in the analysis of the data and writing the research paper.
- Co-authored and presented the research paper at NASSS 2015.

**Other Research**

- **“Let There Be Clamor: Exploring the Emergence of a New Public Sphere in India and Use of Social Media as an Instrument of Activism”** – This research explores the use of social media, namely Twitter, during the 2014 student movement against an incident of on-campus sexual harassment in Kolkata, India. A thematic textual analysis of posts made on the microblogging platform during the protests enabled an analysis of social media as a plausible new public sphere for India.
- **“The Effects of Screen Size and Physical Proximity on Perceptions of Risk and Hazard”** – A collaborative research on the effects of screen size and physical proximity to devices and perceptions of risks or hazards. A *web-based experiment*, the researcher role was limited to conceptualization and analysis of the data. Findings suggest that there is a strong correlation between the device screen size and concept of personal space. Smaller the screen size, more personal the device. Furthermore, participants using cellphones reportedly felt more susceptible to a crisis than tablet users.
- **“Glass Ceiling or Glass Jaw? Gender as Root of Biased Blame Attribution in Contemporary Politics and its Implications for Post-Crisis Image Restoration”** – Explored *gender* as a root for biased blame attribution in contemporary American politics through a *web-based survey*. A collaborative research project, it involved conceptualizing, theorizing and analysis of the survey data. Emphasis was laid on investigating how female leaders may be attributed more blame in crisis, when compared to male leaders.
- **“Blackboard to Windows: A Case Study of Internet Use in a Non-Formal Educational Institution in a Socially and Economically Deprived Section of India”** – A *case-study* of an educational institution operating within an urban slum, located in Kolkata, India, the preliminary research focused upon exploring how social media access impacted the educators and the students of the school. The study documented the educators’ adoption of simple teaching tools offered on the Internet, use of the web to provide better information to the students, and further introducing

students to the use of computers. The study provided insight into how Internet can influence youth from a socio-economically deprived part of the society to learn about opportunities, gain information and knowledge, and in turn work towards productive change.

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## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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### Teaching Positions | Syracuse University

**Instructor-of-Record**, Communications and Society (COM 107,  
Spring 2017), S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications

Spring 2017  
(January – May)

- This course aimed at introducing undergraduates to the field of media and communication.
- Instructed a 90-minute class twice a week throughout the semester, for 56 undergraduate students.
- Designed the syllabus, maintained student contact through regular office hours or meetings by appointments, set weekly current events quizzes, and three exams.
- Wrote and presented 11 lectures for the semester.
- Structured the course content on Blackboard, which was extensively used throughout the semester.
- Reviewed and graded student work.

**Graduate Teaching Assistant**, Communications & Society with Dr.  
Bradley Gorham, Associate Professor of Communications, Chair of  
Communications Department, and Director of Media Studies  
Program at Newhouse.

Fall 2016  
(August to December)

- Set the weekly current events quizzes, which formed 10% of the students' grades. Assisted the professor during exams proctoring and the subsequent grading.
- Assisted and tutored students.

**Graduate Teaching Assistant**, Communications & Society with Dr.  
Anne C. Osborne, Professor of Communications.

Summer 2016  
(July to August)

- Set the weekly current events quizzes, which formed 10% of the students' grades. Assisted the professor during exams proctoring and the subsequent grading.
- Presented an in-class lecture on the “*implications of digital media.*”
- Assisted and tutored students.

### Guest Lectures

- Communications & Society (COM 107, Fall 2016), Assistant Professor Jennifer Grygiel  
Topic: *Media effects research overview*
- Communications & Society (COM 107, Spring 2016), Associate Professor Dr. Anne Osborne  
Topic: *Global media and communication regulations*

- The FPP program guides graduate students, who choose to pursue the responsibilities of being a faculty member, with practical experiential opportunities, and through seminars, mentors, and regular guidance.

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## SKILLS AND INTERESTS

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- **Research methods:** Interviews, ethnography, textual analysis, virtual or cyberethnography, surveys, experiments, content analysis, data analytics and mixed methods.
- **Data collection software:** Qualtrics, Survey Monkey
- **Data analysis software:** SPSS, NVivo
- **Data visualization and network analysis:** Tableau, Infogram, MS Excel, Google Fusion, Gephi, NodeXL
- **Social media:** Hootsuite, Buffer, Tweetdeck, Google Analytics, Twitter Analytics, Facebook & Instagram Insights
- **Other computer skills:** Microsoft Office Suite, Blogging, Wordpress, Coding, SharePoint, Dropbox, Canva, Adobe Spark, Blackboard
- **Languages:** Fluent in English, Hindi and Bengali. Working German

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## WORK EXPERIENCE

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### *Senior Reporter* | **The Telegraph, Calcutta**

Kolkata, WB, India

November 2011 – October 2013

- Beats covered - Arts and entertainment, environment and leisure sports.
- Responsibilities – Daily reporting on city events; developing stories on trending issues and topics; building relationships with diverse social groups and cultivating news sources; managing interns occasionally; editing copies; communicating directly with editor and sub-editors.
- Instrumental in kickstarting the “t2Click” section in the newspaper on November 14, 2012. The section was dedicated to readers’ submissions of photographs on weekly topics: it gave a publication opportunity to passionate photographers and hobbyists. Selected photographs were published in t2Click every week.
- Special feature stories – Photowalking in Kolkata, Cycle Polo, Sports Development projects in Kolkata, Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust (Jersey, Channel Islands, UK) and Bicycling Ban in Kolkata.
- Interviews conducted: Blue Peter Book Award (2011) winning author Lauren St. John; Kindle Million Club author Amanda Hocking; Man Booker Prize (2008) shortlisted author Philip Hensher; bestselling authors such as Amish Tripathi, Ravinder Singh, Ashok Banker, Musharraf Ali Farooqi, Shobhaa De, amongst others; motivational speaker and author Shiv Khera; former World Billiard Champion Geet Sethi; ace photographer Raghu Rai; director of Apeejay Surrendra Group, Priti Paul.

**Intern | iBN 18 Broadcast Limited (CNN iBN, editorial)**

Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

June – July

2011

- CNN iBN (News18), was the Indian network affiliate of the Cable News Network, USA.
- Internship training involved transcribing, ingesting, collecting audience input (vox pops) and live links for the broadcast new channel. Assisted correspondents for stories like 13/7 Mumbai Blasts 2011, MV Wisdom stranded on Juhu beach (June 2011), Neeraj Grover murder case, Mumbai (June 2011).

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**GRANTS AND AWARDS**

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- Bharati Memorial Award for summer research, Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University 2017
- Annual graduate student academic travel grant, S. I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University 2014-2017
- SU Graduate University Fellow, Mass Communication Program, S. I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University 2014-2015

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**SERVICE**

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- Midwinter Research Co-chair (2018-19): Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication ([AEJMC](#)) Commission on the Status of Women
- Research Article Reviewer AEJMC Conference 2019: Commission on the Status of Women
- Moderator AEJMC 2018: ‘Student Research on Cues, Behaviors, and Influencers in Digital Media,’ Communication Technology Division, August 7, 2018.
- Research Article Reviewer AEJMC Conference 2018: LGBTQ Interest group; Commission on the Status of Women
- Research Abstract Reviewer AEJMC Midwinter Conference 2018: Commission on the Status of Women
- [Newsletter](#) Co-chair (2017-18): AEJMC Commission on the Status of Women
- Research Article Reviewer International Communication Association Annual Conference 2017: Feminist Scholarship Division; Mass Communication Division.
- Syracuse University Tenure Committee, Student Member, (2015-16).
- Secretary (2015-16): Syracuse University, S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communication’s Doctoral Student Association.
- Phi Beta Delta Honor Society, Member (2015-16).
- SU Graduate Student Organization Senator representing the Department of Mass Communication, Syracuse University, (Fall 2014).

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## PROFESSIONAL TRAINING AND WORKSHOPS

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- *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* (JMCQ), Reviewer Trainee Program for doctoral students, 2018-2019.
- Participant, [PhDigital Bootcamp](#) hosted by School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Texas State University, funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, March 5 to May 20, 2018.
- Participant, Media Workshop on “*Humanitarian Disasters, Human Rights Violations and Social Media Journalism,*” by the Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group and the British Deputy High Commission Eastern India, December 11 to 14, 2013.
- Participant, international seminar on “*Childhood and Ageing: Contemporary Scenario,*” by the Department of Sociology, University of Calcutta, February 2011.
- Vocational Training Course in Advocacy and Empowerment organized by the Indian Institute of Cerebral Palsy, September 20-24, 2010.