Screen Intimacies: Gamification in Online Dating Applications in India

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines how the concept of play brings to fore a very intimate relationship between technology and humans. The smartphone screen has shifted from being simply a mode of communication to a crucial device for all tasks and activities, including for leisure, pleasure and play. Generating new rituals and communication practices, there are sensual and aesthetic pleasures being offered by the playful media engagement on the screen. Much like how it is with other forms of play, the pleasures of play on screen with reference to dating apps requires a learning of the rules and decoding the codes and conventions. Different apps have their own way in which a user can access it and use it, they have their own variations, interface and levels of interactivity. The paper argues that consumption and leisure at the site of the smartphone screen have come to determine the texture and experience of everyday life. Technologies do transform the everyday life in terms of its spatio-temporal limits and the possibilities. At some levels it offers new possibilities, in others it reinforces power structures which continue to constrain agentic capacities.

Keywords: *Technology, Online Dating, Intimacy, Gamification, Women and Desire*

INTRODUCTION

"Several boys from IIT had written to us. A few emailed us, even offering to take trains down from Chennai but we discouraged them… We were content to chat up boys on the Internet. We each wrote to several boys. Mails went back and forth ten times a day… Over the next year, our social lives were planned carefully on the internet so that no one in Cochin suspected a thing." (Susan 2020, p. 22)

This is an excerpt from the book, *The Women Who Forgot to Invent Facebook and Other Stories,* a collection of short stories by Nisha Susan, centered on the webs of love, intimacy and friendships forged via technology and particularly the Internet. Her stories reflect the transformation of India's digital landscape, where lovers went from, "cooing into cordless phones to swiping right on cellphones" (Susan 2020, p. 1). Her stories speak of the Indian youth who are simultaneously taking pleasure in and resisting the seduction of globalized possibilities. Most stories are from the perspective of young women and men navigating new configurations of dating, love and friendships mediated via digital technologies and screens.

This paper looks at the emerging screen culture on the smartphone as a site that has reconfigured and continues to shape the contours of love, dating and relationships – produced, expressed and negotiated on the screen and played out on dating applications and platforms that facilitate the formation, interaction and projection of the self. Subsequently, technical media such as the smartphone, the Internet, and online dating applications need to be analysed on their own, not as prior to perception but to make evident the interrelationship between the screen, its software, discursive formations and perceptions. This is not to suggest that behaviour of the subject can be predicted but by interpreting the conditions of mediated experience, their actions however can be understood and explained to an extent. The thrust of this article is to identify and articulate the playful newness and continuity of the screen for dating, and also signal the frameworks which determine the relationships between technologies, culture and

individuals, and address the materiality and reality of these technologies and techno-cultures with special emphasis on game-like dating apps.

Although dating is now seen as acceptable in India as long as it converts into a marriage; however, according to a survey conducted by the Lok Foundation and Oxford University, and administered by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) in 2018 across India, revealed that 93% of the respondents admitted that they had an arranged marriage, with 3% saying that they had a "love marriage" and another 2% describing their alliance as "love-cum-arranged" (Shrinivasan, 4 Oct 2018).[2] It is important to flag here that apart from social and cultural factors, digital media literacy and digital access to dating applications is a crucial prerequisite for participation in the online dating world. Subsequently their usage is limited to the middle and upper middle class, and limits the widespread use of these applications. In a fascinating study, Awal (2025) has probed the use of dating applications by women of a certain socioeconomic position in urbanized areas such as Ghaziabad has explored how online dating has become a playful activity, not essentially oriented towards finding love or culminating in marriage. More importantly, this study teases the conflict between middle-class comfort and the pursuit of pleasure in the use and consumption of these applications.

In many societies in contemporary times heterosexual couples meet (or date) and get to know each other before getting married or entering a long-term relationship.[1] There are varying rules and practices of courtship across cultures, which have also changed over time. While in many societies dating is considered a norm and widely acceptable, in many cultures, such as in India there is only now a growing acceptance towards dating or the couple knowing each other before they get married (Kaur, 17 June 2021).

Traditionally, people looking for partners often met offline, either on their own or introduced by their friends, family or colleagues. Eventually technologies such as the telephone, email platforms and messaging services slowly became important ways of communicating, socializing and being in a relationship. From placing advertisements in the newspapers, to declaring radio-love, dating has evolved significantly to include online quantification and gamification of desire and intimacy by the use of algorithms and

artificial intelligence by dating platforms to predict and guide human behaviour when it comes to love, dating and relationships via handheld digital screens (smartphones) (Huang, Hancock and Tong, 2022). In 2020 India had 37 million dating app users, and India is now the second-largest market for dating apps, with revenues, running to $454 million after the US (Mehrotra). This also suggests a change in the perception towards dating apps finding wider acceptance, which were earlier considered too risky or desperate or even ignominious.

A study by Stanford sociologists on how online platforms have become the most popular way in which couples meet, argues that two very specific technological innovations have made online dating popular (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). One, the birth of the World Wide Web, which used the text-based bulletins and notice board systems of yesteryears, to incorporate picture search for visual stimulation. Interestingly, Facebook as we know it now, emerged out of a website experiment in Harvard to rate female students on the campus on the basis of their attractiveness by upvoting or downvoting their photographs. The visual element to a dating service online then made it more visceral and engaging. Secondly, they state that the innovation and the adoption of smartphones made online dating more pervasive. There is in that sense advantages of scale at play, where dating applications can allow access to a larger pool of potential matches, as opposed to offline networks of friends, family and colleagues.

In subsequent sections, the formation, interaction and projection of the self via the use of dating applications will be examined, framing them alongside the screen, its software, discursive formations and perceptions. Additionally, this paper will make a case for examining the use of dating applications as a playful activity in a game context by mapping dating applications and the possibilities they offer to users via game-like elements.

Framing Intimacies: Playability, Screen and Dating Applications

An emerging question is how do we categorize media experiences that do not neatly fit within the definitions of media consumption and use? Specifically, can new

media devices and texts, which offer interactive pleasures and possibilities, be thought of as play? In signalling a "playful turn" Raessens (2006) has argued that play has not received a sustained examination within the field of media studies, apart from work on video games (which has been recent), to use it as a frame of analysis for other media forms and texts (p.2). The concept of gamification is also useful here in exploring the playful nature of media experience. Gamification refers to game like structures, rules and practices being deployed in non-game contexts to fuel user engagement and interest. Gamification is not entirely new but the contexts in which it is being adapted and adopted are certainly novel. The smartphone screen offers numerous possibilities for playful activities and communication. The concept of play is not only a characteristic of leisure, but can also be invoked in other contexts, such as that of consuming content interactively, and in this case, dating applications.

Dating apps are designed and positioned as novel, fun and exciting, and are couched and marketed as essentially playful experiences. In the context of gamification, dating aps exhibit game-playing action, and navigating, accessing and using the app requires different modes of play. In the dating app play universe, gameful interaction begins with first inviting the user to craft their profile and create a personality. There are rules and codes of operating the app that need to be learnt, essentially the skills of the play. Users are encouraged to swipe left (dislike) or swipe right (like) through other profiles. The swipe and scroll mimics and mirrors some of the actual game moves a player makes.

The architectural structure and the features of dating apps are designed as a game-like application – constructing, constraining and empowering users in the play. Caillois (2001) in redefining the concept of play, stressed on how it is separate from everyday life routines, offering the possibilities of using imagination and creativity in what is essentially unpredictable in terms of the outcome. The larger rules of every dating app dictate broad macro moves of play: users can like other profiles and "super like" a limited number of profiles in a day. And every like and super like achieved by the user ultimately feeds into their overall ranking on the app. Playing the game also constitutes certain rules of reaching the intended goal. Every dating app also has its own set of rules – the number

of people you can message in a day, the number of profiles you can accept and reject, the number of super likes or interests you can show – thereby creating a game-like environment of rules to adhere to. On dating apps, much like other games, users can buy premium services as well to bend the rules and get more room for manoeuvring. While the rules of play might not be the most efficient way of reaching the goals, the rules, and following those rules are where the actual pleasure is unlocked – overcoming challenges playfully. Essentially users are competing with other users for a match in the dating pool, in many ways making it a game for users. The strict boundaries between game space and non-game space, virtual and the real seem fuzzy then, with the process of gamification intending to introduce game-like elements in all aspects of life.

Love and relationships have often been packaged in advertising and magazine articles as a commonly understood and accepted emotion that is an integral component of human life and need. Marketers have especially reminded us the value of love in social relationships. Advertisements of dating applications primarily construct and then draw on this human need to find that someone special in life. While a few dating applications such as Tinder and Bumble also position their platforms as avenues for forging friendships, platonic relationships and networking; however, finding romantic love online continues to be the primary driver of these apps.

Often dating and the associated ideas of love, relationships, intimacy and desires are not considered scholarly or warranting serious academic inquiry. Labelled as banal and frivolous, online dating has been limitedly studied to understand the production of the self at the intersections of technology, culture and affect. In essence it is not merely about individual choices exercised or structural compulsions of technical architecture but a complex negotiation of how the subject conducts herself with the screen. The screen is at once an idea, media and technology – and the youth's engagement with it in everyday experience produces certain cultural and identity formations which have been underexplored till now. Digital auto-ethnography method served the purpose of understanding the conditions of mediated play experiences via the screen with the use of Tinder, Bumble, Hinge and Woo dating applications. Dunn and Myers (2020) and Atay (2020) have made a compelling case for this methodology for studying contemporary

digital experiences. The research process was informed by the ontological perspective of multiple realities, and the methods acknowledge the relationship between the author as a researcher and the phenomenon being set out to understand and describe. The author made use of prominent dating applications to understand the interface and structure and develop a more nuanced understanding of how the dating apps worked in general. Representation of these experiences outside the context of this research including, films, memes, advertisements and videos were also examined.

Digital media technologies are offering newer modes of expression and possibilities to young men and women. Prevalent ideas in India around women's bodies, sexual agency and relationships continues to be policed by structures which restrict intermingling between people of the opposite sex (Kumar, 24 Jan 2021), or prohibit couples from accessing public spaces even (Sadam, 26 Aug 2021). These screen dating applications then exist in a liminal space, offering opportunities to navigate the complicated terrains of patriarchy, surveillance, circumscriptions and prospects. The surveillance and restrictions notwithstanding, Internet-based cultural activities under the shadows of the police state and society reflects profound social and cultural transformations, technological changes and innovating ways of navigating the webs of love, dating and relationships. New cultural forms and textual practices have now emerged, bringing in further complexities and contradictions of our techno-cultural society to the fore.

Popular culture references to online dating, including newspaper and magazine articles and online content and quizzes on websites are largely of the self-help variety, focussing on how to crack the code of online dating, how to game the algorithm, the most common mistakes of online dating, advising users on how to craft their profiles (Marotti, 6 Dec 2018), ice-breaker questions, how to ask someone on a date, how to continue keeping the date interested in you afterwards (Times of India), and how to prevent ghosting, harassment and catfishing (Turtis, 23 Jun 2021).

Social media memes on the other hand cover a wide range and breath of dating issues that a person might face, fuelling further conversations and social sharing among

friends (Sroczynski, 15 July 2017). Increasingly, dating apps use their social media handles as well, especially on Instagram and Twitter to engage with and encourage users to share their dating experiences which often take the form of personal stories, memes and jokes around the pitfalls and struggles of online dating. For instance, a popular dating app, Coffee Meets Bagel regularly engages with users on its Instagram page, posting quotes, memes, images and videos.

In the past few years, web series made exclusively for Over-the-top platforms have also used online dating as a premise in their storylines. Some of the popular ones available for streaming on Netflix, including *Indian Matchmaking*, *Too Hot to Handle* and *Love is Blind*, have normalised the idea of online dating to find a romantic interest. In meeting of different but related worlds on the screen, Tinder has teamed up with Netflix to produce a reality show on online dating titled *IRL: In Real Life* in July 2021. Tinder will be the official casting partner for the show. Essentially creating a game within the game to reward and fuel further interest, motivation and engagement by users to play dating apps.

In the last decade India has also seen the opening of comedy clubs across the country, emerging as avenues for stand-up acts by comedy artists. These shows are ticketed, and often involve a comedian coming on stage and entertaining the audience with their jokes, or stand-up acts as they are called, taking references from everyday life, current events and emerging trends. The popularity and acceptance towards online dating apps in India can also be seen from the recurring references to online dating experience in these comic acts. In the year 2019, OkCupid, a popular dating app partnered with six women comedians to present a stand-up show titled #MyKindOfFunny, littered with references to online dating, prevalent attitudes about online dating in India and some hilarious experiences. The campaign involved running three shows, all of which were sold out. In another stand-up act posted by a comedian Ramya Ramapriya on her YouTube channel in 2020, titled "Mumbai Locals and Dating Apps" has garnered 6,145,771 views till September 2021. During the act she shares some of her experiences on Hinge, another popular dating application, and the funny encounters she has had while interacting with men on that app, ranging from Photoshopped profile pictures to bad

grammar (Ramapriya, 6 May 2020). Another popular stand-up comic, Aditi Mittal posted a video of her performance in New York in January 2020, where she mocks her inability to date online since she finds it challenging to click good pictures of herself (Mittal, 4 Sep 2020). In a fictional video made by comedian Anuvab Pal in 2015, there are six encounters a woman can possibly have with men she meets on Tinder, listing some of the types of men an Indian woman is sure to meet on a dating app (Pal, 19 May 2015).

There is then an absence of any account which is neither celebratory nor cautionary towards individual play experiences with the screen via dating applications, and I would like to frame the discussion within the affective regime of automation of desires, mobility and senses. A user's sensory capacities are brought to bear upon these screens and dating applications when their bodies interact with the screen. Additionally, the new levels of mobility offered in terms of choice and spaces point to how technologies also *shape* cultural forms. Emerging developments in the field of dating applications also point towards the widespread use of artificial intelligence. As I will argue subsequently, it would be fruitful if we move away from the dualism of structure and agency in media play since the process of automation and algorithmic models of our contemporary screens do not obliterate agency and reflexivity of the subject – it is about when and how and under what conditions the subject chooses to exercise it.

Mapping Dating Applications

Much like the various stages of a game, playing the dating app requires completing a level to unlock other subsequent levels. The first step in any dating application is for the user to create a profile, which typically includes basic information such as name, age, gender, location, interests, hobbies as well as self-description of who they are and what they desire in a partner. Subsequently, many apps get a questionnaire filled by the user to understand their preferences in a partner, by evaluating the user's personality type in order to search for and match with the most compatible partner. Here the apps make use of proprietary matching algorithms which use this data to design types, draw inferences and show matches. Most dating apps allow for signups and registration for free but offer paid and premium services to access certain features such as a greater

number of matches, ability to message another user, see photographs, search for profiles manually, among others. The users are hence motivated to play and perform, by interacting with the app, sensorially immersing themselves in it, sometimes also spending money to unlock more features. User's reward centre is also stimulated by informing them of the likes they get, how popular their photograph is, giving them incentives to keep playing further. Playful and game-like, dating apps then create play with real life moves on a virtual platform with real life consequences.

For India this sexual and technological wheel turned with Tinder. Tinder was the first dating app to enter the Indian market in 2013. Its swipe gestures on the screen to accept or reject a profile went on to influence other dating apps that emerged after it (right swipe is for acceptance and left swipe is a rejection). Tinder was later acquired by Match Group (this group also did a series of acquisitions, such as OkCupid, Hinge and Plenty of Fish). Shetty sketches the online dating landscape post 2014 with TrulyMadly, Aisle and Woo entering the Indian dating app market in the year 2014, followed by the launch of Hinge in 2015. This was closely followed by the launch of another app, Happn in 2016. The year 2018 saw the release of a slew of dating apps such as Bumble, OkCupid, QuackQuack and Coffee Meets Bagel. The most recent app to enter the dating app scene in India is the homegrown HiHi in the year 2020. In India user penetration of dating apps stood at 2.7% in 2018 and is now pegged to grow to 3.2% by 2023 (Jha, 11 Jun 2021). However, there is a dating imbalance in between genders, out of the 31 million dating app users in 2020, 67 percent were men (Mehrotra, 18 Jan 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic has also seen a surge in the number of people signing up for dating apps, primarily to ward off loneliness from having to be confined in their homes during lockdowns. In a Future of Dating Report, released by Tinder in 2021, they claimed that 18–25-year old's make up for the largest user base on their apps (Joshi, 1 Aug 2021). The same report also revealed that about 68% of those interviewed found it easier to forge connections online and 67% of them believed that meeting someone online was liberating. In the same report, 90% of the respondents also shared that they tried online dating to make friends, especially during the pandemic and lockdown. Aisle, a homegrown Indian dating app has reported that in 2021 they witnessed a 28% user growth

and a 25% increase in daily active users. They also reported that more and more users are upgrading to premium services and making in-app purchases (signing up on dating apps is for free, but using their services and features involve buying those services for a fee). A similar figure has also been shared by another dating app, TrulyMadly, with many users logging in the night between 10 pm and 2 am (Hariharan, 20 May 2021). In a survey done by Bumble during the pandemic, about 44% people believed that online dating apps are now the only viable way to meet a romantic partner. Bumble prides itself for being an app which provides women safety and agency, by only allowing women to initiate the first conversation instead of receiving unsolicited messages. In the same survey about 50% of the people revealed that they do not look at meeting someone online disapprovingly anymore. Many of these apps heavily promoted virtual dating during the pandemic, nudging users to explore virtual dates and relationships till the pandemic got over (Patwa, 2021). QuackQuack registered a 300% increase in signups since the beginning of the lockdown, getting 11 million users on their platform (IANS, 19 Dec 2020). Further, in a report published by Tinder in 2021, due to lockdowns and shutting down of bars and restaurants, users were open to going on 'grocery shopping' dates (Indian Express, 20 Aug 2021). In fact, a recent article published a few tips on how to find your "Lockdown Love" (Menon, 1 Sep 2021). Video and audio dates have become widely popular, with many dating apps plugging in "Date-from-home" features on their platforms, suggesting online games that users can play together.

Conversation around the smartphone screen in my own network revealed a reflection on their sensory experiences of using dating apps, such as a notification of a probable match, the vibration and tone when receiving a message, the feeling of technological intimacy with the screen and other emotional and affective responses to this experience. The fascinating thing about online dating experience is how the screen and the app offer a meeting of the local and the global, and the use of certain vocabulary and language which reveal a transnational mode of identity construction. Since the concept of online dating is relatively new in India, there is always a reference to certain social norms and traditions in the process of shifting experiences of cultures and identities. Most people would have encountered the terms "hook-up" and "ghosting" on the screen itself, and the ease with which these practices and terms became their own, pointing to the continuing

dynamic between online and offline activity, technology and the individual, tradition and globalized modernity.

If we de-centre the technology behind dating apps, we can see them working towards inviting the user to give their time, concentration and effort to the app by roping them in to give a lot of thought to how they describe themselves, the pictures they put up and the interests and hobbies they mention. The apps' interface and structure create a world of possibilities, as well as suggestions for how to craft an ideal profile, ideas for romantic outings and activities that can be done on a virtual date etc. In that sense there is a very real mediation of the emotions of the user by the screen and the app, producing conditions within which they come to experience dating, love and relationships.

Automation of Screen Intimacy and Desire

There is now an increasing use of non-human technology actors such as algorithms and automated systems to mediate and navigate human experiences such as dating, relationships and love. In August 2021 a French journalist Judith Duportail shared her experience of requesting and retrieving her personal information and data from Tinder in a docuseries called *Connected* available for streaming on Netflix. She revealed how her personal file with Tinder ran over 800 pages, with details of her chats with every user, including sexting and kinky conversations. Additionally, she discovered that Tinder's algorithm was composed of a controversial "desirability quotient" scoring system – based on the number of right (like) and left (unlike) swipes a profile gets, with a lesser score subsequently limiting the chances of a user's profile being shown to other users, as opposed to most right-swiped profiles landing on other users' stack (Ghoshal, 12 Aug 2021). Her experience revealed what has now come to be discussed as the "quantification of desires" within the dating app industry. In the last few years, the mechanism behind how dating apps work, which includes proprietary algorithms and machine-learning tools has pointed to the increasingly automated operation of these platforms. Automation is essentially a business-critical activity for dating apps, and how successful they are in building an algorithm which produces compatible matches is directly proportionate to their revenues. In that sense they can be seen as modelling social relationships by using

graph databases which identify relationships between different data points of the information provided by users.

While the focus on numbers and data is not entirely new as even before the overt use of algorithms, figures such as age, height, weight, income among others, were significant factors in filtering and matching users according to their preferences. However now, almost all dating apps make use of algorithmic models to match and show profiles to a user that has the highest chance of compatibility, based on user's preferences themselves (age, location, height, weight, education, profession), as well as other parameters which apps codify in their algorithmic models to arrive at the best possible match outcome. In effect, these apps work behind the scenes to pair users with the most probable match. This has been done to save people the time of trawling through a database and swiping right or left, often considered a tiring activity, and in many ways a reductive way of picking a date simply based on how other users look.

While most apps have their own proprietary algorithms that they develop after considerable research, choosing their own set of variables and preferences to factor in the filtering of choices for a user, many apps are also incorporating machine learning algorithms. These algorithms adapt to the user's interaction with the app and other profiles as well to learn the preferences of the user. These then get fed into the algorithm which adapts to the user's preferences and changes and filters the results and profile matches shown to the user subsequently. For instance, an example of a machine learning algorithm on a dating app will study the profiles of other people the user has interacted with and liked, and understand their characteristics and feed that into the algorithm. If a user consistently interacts with profiles that are above a certain age, for instance, then the algorithm will adapt and accordingly in subsequent results show matches above that age range only. Subsequently it automates the demographic of the profiles shown to the user. While dating apps like Tinder and Bumble ask very few questions when a user initially signs up (such as age, gender and location), Hinge, another dating app for instance, is premised on its ability to match users with their friends of friends or their extended social circle. In this way the technology becomes creative, in serving a compatible romantic match as per its calculations, in a kind of collaborative filtering with the audience-user.

The collaborative-filtering also narrows options, in the sense that if you swipe left to a profile, for reasons entirely unknown to the algorithm, it might not show potential matches based on its understanding of why you chose to swipe left on someone. In that sense compatibility and desirability are different, and while the filtering can make statistical sense, it does not translate into a wide choice. In an article on the practice of filtering by dating apps, a user of Coffee Meets Bagel reported that she always saw suggestions of other Arab or Muslim users even though she explicitly chose the option of no preference for ethnicity. In her correspondence to the dating app asking for why they only showed her users of a specific ethnicity, she was told by the app that even though she disregarded ethnicity as a parameter for finding a date, the system does not understand "no ethnic preference" as a choice for diversity and shows her users who have chosen to date her ethnicity instead. They also mentioned that even though users themselves might state they have no preference, but their data suggests that users often subconsciously date within their group (Notopoulos, 14 Jan 2021). In many ways suggesting that at best dating applications make accessible a larger pool of people to choose from to date, but their machine-learning algorithms and automation processes cannot fully account for human emotions and behaviours, and who people actually connect with. In spite of this, most dating apps pride in their algorithms and systems which appropriately match people. Whether or not the automation results in satisfactory matches, it certainly has made looking at profiles and choosing who to date a perfunctory action.

Many social media platforms including dating applications also use their machine-learning tools to flag and identify offensive messages by prompting and asking users if they want to report inappropriate behaviour. In 2020, Tinder added another feature whereby after screening messages from potential matches, the app would ask "Does this bother you?" if their algorithm would read harassment or abuse in the message exchange between two people. The grey area between potentially offensive and flirting texts can be difficult to discern by an algorithm, as context of the conversation is meaningfully relevant. In order to circumvent this, the Tinder algorithm was trained by feeding messages to it which had been reported as inappropriate by previous users. This then led to the building of a database which includes keywords and pattens which would

suggest if the message was offensive. As the algorithm is exposed to more messages, it learns and adapts to understand how to flag such messages. Eventually Tinder hopes to personalize the algorithm based on each user's behaviour and preferences so that it is custom-built to their context. This development is against the backdrop of how harassment on dating apps is rampant, with women twice as likely to have been sexually harassed online, in comparison to men (Pardes, 27 Jan 2021). In this light, Tinder also introduced another feature around the same time, called "Undo", where in the same machine-learning algorithm would screen the message being typed by the user and in real-time ask and discourage the user by asking "Are you sure?".

In some instances, users have circumvented the automated systems and have been known to 'game' the dating app system by running their own computer programs to widen their chances of landing a potential date. In 2019 Matt Taylor developed a computer script that would automatically swipe right on Tinder (a gesture on the smartphone screen that says that a user is interested in a profile) on every profile that matched his preference. In a few hours the program had swiped right to 25,000 profiles. Out of all these right swipes, he eventually matched with 9 users, and went on to date and marry one of them. After this, many apps have strengthened their security systems to prevent such gaming of their apps and even penalize those who right swipe on every user profile (Park, 13 Nov 2019). Additionally, to prevent fraud, a few dating applications also employ photo-recognition software which detects if the image is duplicated from the Internet (Finley).

Many apps also suggest algorithmically which photographs would make for a good profile picture on the app, in a way homogenizing profiles and users. Coffee Meets Bagel has a feature where you upload two profile pictures and let other users on the platform vote on which one amongst the two is more attractive. The process of automation in terms of algorithms and profile matching is also governed by the amount of money a user spends inside the app. For instance, Tinder allows users to buy "super likes" which makes it more likely for the user's profile to be shown to other users. Similarly, Coffee Meets Bagel allows users to buy "bagels" or upgrade and search for more profiles and message users directly. Other ways in which dating apps make money is by re-purposing

user data and sharing it with third parties, such as Facebook and Google for instance for re-targeted marketing, akin to living in an AI cave.

Another rather unexplored aspect of automation that does not involve algorithms matching people is that of bots on the system. It is evident from reviews left by users on Play Store (the app and platform from which Android users download other apps), that multiple users had encountered bots on the dating app platforms. Often, they were notified of potential interest in their profile and asked to upgrade to premium services. Subsequent to the upgrade, the interest notifications would disappear or the user would cease to reply, raising concerns of unethical practices by dating applications.

The Games We Play: Reframing the Dating Process

The process of transfer of computer technology from industrial use to the home environment has accelerated in the last few years, revealing how the regimes of automation, mobility and sensing operate in our technologically mediated lives. The world of dating apps is increasingly mirroring for instance, online shopping apps and platforms: Search, Scroll, Swipe. Online shopping app algorithm knows the category of products a user is interested in and continues to show the results of products the user might like. The user exits the app but the re-targeted advertisements and marketing efforts continue to follow the user, showing them the same products and its advertisements on different websites and pages wherever the user goes.

This however does not mean that automation and algorithmic models of dating apps completely subsume human agency. In most of my interviews, the respondents shared that they were looking for a relationship or to meet new people, and not necessarily working towards marriage. They are also repurposing the app for finding friends and not just romantic partners. Users are free to log out and uninstall or even reject the matches they are given. The app however will continue to evolve in a way in which it will attempt to understand the user better, adapt to them via machine learning models, and continue to show profiles it assumes best matches the criteria or tastes of the user. Even within the regimes of automation, there is resistance and negotiation, and even conflict in meaning-

making, as there is a struggle between production and consumption. The screen and the app are used, re-used and appropriated differently by consumers, and even rejected. The implication of technology then is not just in how it is built, produced and circulated, but in how it is eventually consumed.

Online dating applications much like other new media products, have woven themselves in everyday life, disrupting spatiotemporal organization and producing new rhythms and spaces. The presence of the screen and media forms in popular culture have over a period of time now become ubiquitous and even unremarkable, as people become increasingly familiar with them. There is now a complicated interweaving of the real and the virtual, with the screen mediating our lived experiences, our time and our spaces. The everyday culture of media technologies draws our bodies and the communication of those bodies into the realms and temporalities of technology.

The texture and circuits of the digital culture produced by dating apps raises certain issues. First, while dating as a practice has existed for long, online dating via apps leads to a certain playful "newness". This newness can be identified, described and understood in relation to the changes in spatiotemporal contexts of dating and the formation of techno-social relationships. Second, dating apps bring to fore the discussion of play with respect to use of the screen and dating app technologies. Navigating and experimenting with dating apps is an activity which is done at leisure and provides pleasure in it itself: the ability to see many people, know about them, their lives, see their pictures, all of these sensory experiences are now new modes of cultural engagement. Third, dating apps lead to the formation of new intimacies between bodies, screens and perception. Fourth and last is how dating apps reveal the complex nature of human and technological agency in their interaction with each other.

The concept of play also brings to fore a very intimate relationship between technology and humans. The smartphone screen has shifted from being simply a mode of communication to a crucial device for all tasks and activities, including for leisure, pleasure and play. Generating new rituals and communication practices, there are sensual and aesthetic pleasures being offered by the playful media engagement on the screen.

Much like how it is with other forms of play, the pleasures of play on screen with reference to dating apps requires a learning of the rules and decoding the codes and conventions. Different apps have their own way in which a user can access it and use it, they have their own variations, interface and levels of interactivity. Dating apps also offer another crucial play element, reminiscent of video games, of creating avatars or identities. The dating apps are predicated upon the "profiles" which users create of themselves, identifying who they are, representing their sense of self to the world, via text and images, constructing their online identities. In that sense the semiotic universe of dating apps needs to be learnt and practiced by users to get a successful match and an eventual date. The phenomenon of virtual dates, especially during Covid-19 further amplifies the element of play in the use of the screen – the representation of self and each other's worlds and the simulation of a date itself via the screen. Further, the gamification element of dating apps involves stimulating users' reward centre from earning points, special badges, extra likes and competing in the dating market pool for a good match. It requires the user to use various permutations and combinations to craft the ideal profile, choose the right photographs and use the right words to snag a match.

The entry of the screen and dating applications, its adoption and consumption leads to negotiations of dating practices, tastes and preferences. The domestication of these technologies leads to reconfiguring of the boundaries of identities, cultures and relationships. The screen is not fixed to a particular space, and is consumed inside and outside, in public and private, in all spaces people find themselves in. The screen is significant in how its consumption impacts lives and relationships, reorganizing everyday life. Technologies, and specifically the screen and dating applications in question here forge new intimate relationships between human actors and non-human actors (technology). In that sense the screen has become an embodied technology. Consumption and leisure at the site of the screen have come to determine the texture and experience of everyday life. There are certain pleasures and freedoms in all these sites, with users individually and collectively constructing ideas through these cultural practices in their interaction with the screen. Technologies do transform the everyday life in terms of its spatio-temporal limits and the possibilities and the nature of this transformation though

debated, certainly exists. At some levels it offers new possibilities, in others it reinforces power structures which continue to constrain agentic capacities.

ENDNOTES

1.   I specifically mention heterosexual couples in the context of marriage, since in many countries same-sex couples are still not allowed to obtain a marriage license, including India. For the purpose of my research, interviews have been conducted with respondents who identified themselves as heterosexual, i.e., attracted to the opposite sex.

2.   "Love marriage" is a uniquely Indian term referring to marriage alliances which emerge out of two people who have been in love before they got married. This is a euphemism to refer to the practice of couples knowing each other or being in a relationship before they tied the knot. Often this also connotes resistance by parents, as the other term "love-cum-arranged" suggests a negotiation between the already-in love couple, and their parents who have consented to the marriage eventually. Consequently, an arranged marriage refers to an alliance which is fixed by the parents of the couple, with the couple having no prior relationship before marriage.

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