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Abstract:

The rapid digitalisation, neoliberalisation, and globalisation in countries like India and South Africa are profoundly transforming the sexual identities and sexual politics of these Global South contexts. In particular, dating apps like Grindr are changing the ways in which young gay men's identities and relationships are formed, mediated, and embodied. In this article, I ethnographically explore the ways in which Grindr offers much needed visibility to young middle-class gay men in India and South Africa where powerful heteropatriarchies marginalise their sexualities and masculinities. Yet at the same time, the inequality that marks this digital and neoliberal expansion means that gay dating applications like Grindr also reproduce these very inequalities of race, caste, and class. I reveal in particular the growing commodification of gay identities and sexualities that is mediated through digital platforms, producing a hierarchy between 'classy gays' and 'poor gays'. Desire itself becomes commodified wherein 'poor gays' are not desirable bodies or identities and the performance of class and consumption becomes central to claims of sexual desirability. Grindr's geolocating technology allows middle-class gay men to discriminate against 'poor gays' through the spatial and urban inequalities of cities like Delhi and Johannesburg, further amplifying the inequalities of race, caste, and class. In this context, 'Grindr Wars' take place, which reveal the social and symbolic tensions, clashes, and violences that shape queer life in India and South Africa today.

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Introduction

On a cold winter's day in 2022 I met Jacob, one of my research participants in Johannesburg. Jacob was twenty-seven, worked in a bank in the city, and belonged to the emerging Black middle classes of South Africa. His parents had grown up in a former apartheid-era township of Johannesburg, but through securing an education and a high-status white-collar job, Jacob had managed to 'escape' the township, as he often put it, and now lived in one of the city's wealthy suburbs. We met at a restaurant in his upmarket neighbourhood, which we regularly frequented as it was in between both of our houses, and spent a long time catching up and chatting. On that day, Jacob pulled out his phone to open Grindr, a gay dating application, and scanned the various profiles that popped up around him. One of the profiles that came up close to Jacob was another Black young man, looking stylish and well dressed, holding a glass of wine and smiling at the camera. On seeing this photo, Jacob exclaimed excitedly:

> *He is cute! This is the kind of profile I like. You can tell just from his profile photo that he is relationship material – not too slutty and not too boring. Something classy and stylish about him. I like him. He is potentially husband material!*

In a related but different context, in New Delhi, India, in March 2022 on a follow-up fieldwork visit, I met up with Suraj, a research participant with whom I had long worked together. Suraj too belonged to the middle class and was employed at a multinational company. Hanging out in Connaught Place in Delhi, Suraj and I chatted about Grindr and online dating in Delhi. Suraj remarked:

> *Grindr is really the best way to show your gay side and meet other gay people who are like-minded and close by. If you are straight, life is so easy; you can meet girls all the time and you can see them. Everywhere is a straight meeting ground! But as a gay man, it is so hard. You don't just randomly meet other gay men, right? On the streets you can't tell which man is gay and*

> *which one is not. So that is why Grindr is very helpful. You can check and chat with like-minded people.*

For Suraj, the profiles he liked were men who 'showed faces', were not 'too old', and were from a 'similar background'. He expressed it like this:

> *If you are using Grindr for dating, like me, then you want someone who is from the same background, someone who is educated and can hold a conversation, right? Someone who is not just looking for sex but actually has a face and a personality, but also someone you won't be embarrassed about being seen in public with!*

These brief narratives of young men in the contexts of post-apartheid South Africa and postcolonial India hint at the ways in which their everyday social interactions and intimacies are mediated through queer dating apps like Grindr. There are several themes to be critically unpacked in these narratives. These narratives hint at both the need and uses of Grindr within the heteropatriarchal contexts of India and South Africa where queer visibility is limited and these digital spaces provide important spaces for queer friendships, desire, and relationships and for demonstrating one's 'gay side' or sexuality. Yet at the same time, young men like Jacob and Suraj, living in contexts of the Global South defined by high inequality, poverty, and unemployment, seek profiles and men who are 'classy' and from the 'same background'. These narratives open up many questions around who is framed as attractive and desirable on the basis of their Grindr profiles and who as undesirable. It gives us an insight into changing gay cultures, identities, and desires in relation to emerging consumer cultures, neoliberalism, and digital changes in the Global South.

In this article, I explore some of these themes around the ways in which Grindr as a dating platform offers new forms of gay visibility to young gay men in India and South Africa, but also how already existing social, cultural, and economic inequalities interplay with this gay visibility on the dating app. In so doing, I demonstrate and trace the commodification of gay cultures and gay identities in India and South Africa, as both countries are undergoing intense and rapid neoliberal expansion, and how these changes are manifested online. I argue that social and symbolic 'Grindr Wars' take place on the platform, reproducing the already existing social and cultural inequalities of race, class, and caste in complex ways amongst gay men and producing hierarchies within commodified gay cultures. Building on the existing literature on Grindr and inequalities (Conner 2019, 2023; Shield 2017, 2019), I expand the analysis to think about these inequalities in the contexts of the Global South where digitalisation and neoliberalism are emerging phenomena, operating in contexts with different sexual and gendered histories and ine-

qualities. In this way, I show that the digital app provides an important site for gay connectivity and identity in the Global South but also becomes a site where inequalities, hierarchies, and social and cultural clashes get amplified and reproduced online in complex and novel ways. By taking a comparative ethnographic perspective, this article emphasises the shared commodified sexuality and classed anxieties that are emerging for middle-class gay men in both India and South Africa and their various online mediations.

Cities and their spatial inequalities are central to the ways in which desire is mediated online and shape the narratives, assessments, and dating patterns of the young men. Grindr as a geolocation-based app becomes a tool through which the wider sexual and gendered politics of gay men in their city spaces are articulated, revealing various socio-spatial inequalities and how these shape desire and interactions and create both intimacies and exclusions. The platform design and usability of Grindr is important to highlight in this context as it interplays powerfully with the urban inequality within India and South Africa. Grindr operates through a spatial logic which facilitates connections and conversations with other people spatially placed close to each other. The profiles of other people appear in a grid pattern made up of various squares, each of which is filled with one user profile. Profiles can display a photo and 10 characters of text and the squares are arranged according to geolocation so that profiles of people who are located closest to the user appear uppermost. In context of apartheid-era spatial inequalities in Johannesburg or the high levels of urban poverty in New Delhi, this geolocating logic of Grindr becomes important for the production of tensions between 'classy gays' and 'poor gays'. I conceptualise this tension as 'Grindr Wars', following Andrew Hartman's (2019) concept of 'cultural wars' which have profound social and cultural impact on the everyday lives of marginalised people.

The literature on mediated intimacies and dating apps has largely focused on Global North communities and the changing intimate lives and identities of dating app users (Andreassen et al. 2017; Broeker 2023; McGlotten 2013; Attwood et al. 2017; Jamieson 2013; Hakim 2019). This work has importantly shed light on the design and platform interface of dating apps, on the ways in which inequalities of race, class, and gender operate on apps, and on the changing nature of the self. However, little research has explored how these dynamics appear in context of the Global South, particularly in postcolonial countries like India, South Africa, Brazil, or Egypt where rapid digitisation has a significant impact on the gendered and sexual lives of young people through dating apps (for some exceptions, see Das 2019; Jha 2022; Dasgupta 2022). Within this limited literature on dating apps in the Global South, little attention is paid to non-heterosexual desires and the use of dating apps in empirically grounded studies. In this context, thinking ethnographically about gay sexualities and masculinities from the Global South

makes an important contribution to the scholarship on dating apps and mediated intimacies: relatively marginal gay masculinities become a lens to critically reflect on sexual politics, masculinities, and neoliberalism and on the changing nature of mediated intimacies within gay cultures.

In order to make these arguments, I build analytically on the comparative ethnographic perspectives on masculinities (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 2003; Cornwall et al. 2016) and the digital anthropology and digital sociology literatures around the self, sexuality, and mediated intimacies (Horst and Miller 2020; boyd 2015; McGlotten 2013; Conner 2023; Shield 2019). Over the last years, I spent time ethnographically hanging out with thirty-five young men in Delhi and Johannesburg and carrying out a range of life history conversations and semi-structured interviews as well as collecting observational data. The young gay men I worked with were primarily 'middle-class' men and I was seeking to understand the ways in which these men perform and embody 'middle classness' (Philip 2022). I was specifically looking at the everyday lives of young men to understand their masculinities in relation to questions of class, gender, sexuality, race, and urban space and violence. The digital was an important part of these everyday lives, and discussions about dating apps kept recurring with the young men who identified as gay.

In Johannesburg the young men largely came from white-collar middle-class and upper middle-class backgrounds and worked in banks, financial organisations, and various multinational corporations. They lived in the wealthy northern suburbs of Johannesburg, especially Sandton, Rosebank, and Waterfall Estate. I met them through mutual friends and colleagues whilst doing ethnographic fieldwork on the Black middle classes as part of my postdoctoral research for the University of Cambridge-based project entitled 'Gendered Violence and Urban Transformations in India and South Africa', funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, United Kingdom. As a queer-feminist male researcher, I was able to form meaningful relationships with my research participants who felt comfortable talking to me about their sexuality and, in turn, asking many questions about queer life in the Great Britain and in India. Similarly, the young men in Delhi were middle-class and upper middle-class men who worked in corporate offices, banks, and multinational companies and lived in relatively affluent parts of South Delhi. I knew some of these young men from my doctoral fieldwork in the city, and these long-term research participants introduced me to more young gay men from within their social circles. All the men in the sample across the two countries identified publicly as 'gay' with various degrees of 'outness' to families, friends, colleagues, and other people in their social circles. Hence, rather than using the more politically and intellectually useful term 'queer', I use the term 'gay' as this was how the men described themselves. All the young men were active users of Grindr and had varied experiences of the application.

The article is structured as follows: I first consider the wider social and cultural context of India and South Africa where heteropatriarchies make queer and gay visibility and masculinities marginal and invisible. Within this context, dating apps like Grindr become important to create gay visibility. The second section looks at the digitised commodification of gay men's bodies, identities, and masculinities on Grindr, which is important for their performance of middle-class gay respectability and class status in the neoliberalising contexts of India and South Africa. The third section examines how, through these commodified bodies and masculinities, desire itself is located in specific spaces, which is further enabled by the geolocation feature of apps like Grindr. In the final section of the article I analyse how these dynamics operating in and through Grindr reproduce inequalities of class, caste, and race in both contexts and create hierarchies and exclusions but also belonging in complex ways.

Gay visibility and dating apps in heteropatriarchal contexts

India and South Africa are two countries that have been infamously labelled as 'rape capitals of the world' with high levels of reported violence towards women and queer people (Matebeni et al. 2018; A Roy 2020). In this context, although these histories of sexual and queer politics remain outside the scope of this article, what is important to highlight is the continued shared sense of insecurity and social invisibility and the broader social and cultural marginalisation that gay men experience on an everyday level in both contexts (H Roy 2021; Reddy 2009; S Roy 2022). Both India and South Africa are 'middle income' countries with rapid neoliberal and technological expansion taking place and in both homosexuality is no longer formally criminalised, unlike other 'middle income' formerly colonised countries such as Pakistan or Nigeria. The shared neoliberal transformations, technological change, and legal recognition of homosexuality in both countries make this an interesting and important comparative context to think about changing social and cultural forms of sexuality that shape the everyday lives of gay men and their masculinities.

For young gay men in India and South Africa, Grindr was an important social platform for creating their sense of self and a sense of community. For example, Sanjay (29) in Delhi observed:

> *Growing up I used to think I was abnormal because I did not like girls or want to spend time with them. There were no gay role models on TV, and I didn't personally know any gay people. So I was very lonely growing up. Grindr really changed all of that for me, because I remember when I downloaded the app for the first time and started using it, I suddenly realised that there were other 'abnormal' people like me less than a kilometre away*

> *from home! I felt so good … that I was not alone … that I was not that abnormal, you know.*

For young men like Sanjay digital apps like Grindr provide an important platform for sexual, romantic, and social encounters within the deeply patriarchal social context of contemporary India, which privileges heterosexual and heteronormative masculinities (H Roy 2021; Philip 2022; Srivastava 2010). In this largely heteronormative environment, Grindr opens up a queer digital space where Sanjay can feel visible and enact his sexuality. It is a social space which allows him to be gay and represent his sexuality. Rather than just a digital platform which enables connections, the app serves as an important tool for the creation and management of his queer self. The self then, as scholars of digital media have argued, is for young people something that cannot be divided neatly into 'online' and 'offline' selves (Attwood et al. 2017). Indeed, this false dichotomy between real and virtual is challenged by queer digital selves: the digital is where so much of queer identity for middle-class youth is structured, created, and maintained. Hence for young men like Sanjay, Grindr as a digital sociality serves as a platform to perform his sexual self across spaces and times.

In the South African context too, Grindr is a 'lifeline', as a young man called Kagiso put it. It helped him balance his sense of being 'African' and being a 'man' with his sexuality. Kagiso explained:

> *As a gay Zulu guy I never thought I would be happy because, for my family and culture, I'm like a lost man, a failed man, you know, who cannot have a wife or start a home. But I've now met lots of other Zulu guys who are gay through Grindr and I'm feeling that no, it is not wrong to be Zulu and gay! I can be both and my family is also slowly understanding because I'm not shy of being Zulu and gay. I'm proud of both. So slowly they are being proud of it too. Honestly Grindr really helped me. It was a lifeline, because otherwise I didn't think you could be both. It's so hush-hush. But at least online there is openness and honesty.*

In Kagiso's narrative, Zulu masculinity is characterised by various social obligations that are linked to the reproduction of a heteronormative family. As scholars have argued, this becomes an important disciplining and structuring idea for African masculinities (Langa 2020; Hunter 2004; Matebeni et al. 2018; Reddy 2009). In this context, Grindr allows Kagiso to create a sense of balance between his identities of being 'African' and 'gay'.

Within the heteropatriarchal social contexts of India and South Africa, the need to conform and perform heterosexual masculinity is an important aspect of constructing an appropriate and socially acceptable masculinity (Hunter 2010; Srivastava 2004; Philip 2022; Vetten and Ratele 2013; Chow-

dhury 2023; Dasgupta 2017; Gqola 2007; Hassim 2014; Gouws 2021). This dynamic creates a social context wherein queer and gay masculinities take on a subordinate position, often hidden and invisible, or socially marginalised. Judith Butler (2002) would argue that within the heterosexual matrix that shapes social contexts, Kagiso and Sanjay become bodies, masculinities, and identities that cause 'gender trouble' for not conforming to heteronormative masculine expectations. However, the digital space that Grindr creates and its accessibility to and wide reach amongst the wealthier middle-class men in India and South Africa becomes an important counter-public wherein sexualities and non-normative masculinities can be demonstrated and visualised. For danah boyd (2010, 2015), this idea of digital publics and their productive roles becomes important when thinking about intimacy, sexuality, and identity from the margins of heteronormative society.

Digitised commodification of desires, bodies, and masculinities

Beyond offering visibility to queer selves and bodies in the Global South, dating apps such as Grindr also reveal the ways in which the queer self is socially produced in and through the wider social, economic, and cultural politics at play. Particularly in the context of neoliberal expansion, scholars in India and South Africa argue, the rise of a consumptive middle class which valorises and encourages consumer goods, brands, and globalised tastes and aesthetics produces commodified middle-class masculinities and commodified desires, bodies, and identities (Posel 2010; Philip 2022; Mbembe and Nuttall 2008; Iqani 2022). Interestingly these dynamics are mirrored and take on new and novel forms within the context of Grindr and the construction and representations of gay masculinities in these digital spaces.

The digitised commodification of the gay self, of desire, and of masculinity itself was visible in the aspirations and anxieties of several of my middle-class gay research participants in both Johannesburg and Delhi. Suraj and Taj, two young gay men, are long-term interlocutors from my fieldwork in Delhi since 2016. We still keep in regular contact via social media, and they often update me with their 'Grindr tales', heartbreaks, and romantic adventures. At a recent meeting in Delhi in 2022, we discussed how their online dating lives have evolved over the years. Interestingly, both still considered Grindr the best dating application as they regard it as having the greatest number of young men in Delhi. Suraj, for example, had tried other apps like Tinder and Hinge but continued to prefer Grindr because it allows for maximum reach. One of the challenges, he contended, was that in contemporary contexts Grindr was seen as a casual sexual hook-up app rather than a serious dating application:

> *Now a lot of guys think that Grindr is just for hook-ups, so they don't meet you with the right intention. But actually that is not*

true. Even on Grindr you can meet some really nice and genuine people who are looking for connections. So I prefer Grindr, really.

In this way Grindr was still an important app for both young men. For them 'casual hook-ups' were not desirable or respectable articulations of sexuality; rather, a monogamous and normative idea of 'coupledom', 'love', and 'relationships' provided the idealised form of gay sexuality which they sought on Grindr.

For both Suraj and Taj, having the 'correct' profile photo and text on their profiles was critically important. They and other young men spent lots of time taking appropriate photos that were dateable, and much discussion took place amongst them about what 'messages' a certain profile picture or particular text would give a viewer. For example, whenever I would hang out with Suraj and Taj, we would spend several hours walking around malls and shopping centres taking photos in a variety of stylised poses. Suraj would often instruct Taj on how to take a photo and commented on which angles and poses suited him best, to guide Taj to take 'correct' photos. For several photos, Suraj was explicit about cutting out 'crowds' from the background or stray dogs that might have accidentally entered the frame, because these were not desirable traits of marking his belonging to an appropriately commodified space and aesthetic. For him, this was one of luxury, surrounded by western consumer goods and brands. The images had to 'cleaned', as he would put it, from the 'mess' of urban India and its various inequalities, to create a 'classy' image. Taj, in turn, required a series of photos which highlighted his shoes, when he had bought a new pair. Taj felt that the new shoes added to his image and were important to feature on his profile page to represent an appropriately classed and commodified masculinity. For the young men, getting these profile image 'correctly', as they spoke about it, was an important task in creating and representing their classed masculinity digitally.

This curation and presentation of a desirable and commodified masculinity also became the criteria through which the profiles of other gay men were assessed for their 'suitability'. When Suraj and Taj considered what makes a photo or a profile attractive, it became evident that, for them, similarly classed and stylised images of the body, face, and background were critical for an attractive and desirable online profile. Interestingly, when we scrolled through profile pictures of gay men who were suggested as suitable on Grindr, Taj commented that he looked for things like watches, shoes, hats, and other consumer goods because these demonstrate the ability to consume. Suraj, in turn, liked photos taken in 'classy' venues like cafes or parties or in other social spaces, rather than photos taken in bed or showing 'unclassy' settings. Hence the association and proximity to wealth, consumption, shopping, and western brands becomes an important way in which masculinities are commodified and embodied, but also desired.

In the South African context, a young Black gay man called Thabo similarly remarked that he liked profiles where men had an 'expensive' look:

> *You need to be attracted to the profile. He has got to have something extra, you know. Someone well dressed, looking sharp, looking expensive, classy, that's the kind of guy I like. Someone who takes care of themselves and is serious about themselves.*

What is interesting here is that Thabo, mirroring the narrative of Jacob, the Black middle-class gay young man whom we met in the introduction, is also explaining a desire along specifically classed lines by which the profiles that are desirable are 'classy' and 'bougie' in their digital representation. In his narrative there is an idea that the men who are well dressed and appear to be so take themselves 'seriously' and are, by extension, 'serious' about dating and other aspects of life too. What is also striking in Thabo's narrative is that the characteristics of being well dressed and 'looking sharp' are valued as positive traits that make a profile and person stand out and be 'extra'. In a context of high economic and social as well as racialised inequality, such commodified ideas of 'standing out' take place within a wider context of neoliberalisation and its consumer cultures of gender and sexuality that shape the Black middle classes in South Africa whilst most citizens continue to live in poverty (Iqani 2022; Nuttall 2004; Tucker 2009).

Interestingly, the practice of removing hair was mentioned by young men in both India and South Africa as important for a 'desirable' masculinity. Thabo, for example, declared: 'You know the expensive gays from the poorer ones just by looking at their grooming. The classier boys are always better groomed, they have a clean, hairless look. And that is quite important. You don't want a cave man!' Similarly, in Delhi Suraj pronounced: 'I don't like hairy guys. it just seems a bit unhygienic and unkempt to me. I think if you are a decent guy that takes care of yourself, then you would at least shave your body and keep it clean and hygienic.' The practice of body hair removal and grooming is framed in terms of 'cleanliness' and 'hygiene'. These tropes have much longer histories and etymologies in both India and South Africa through caste and racialised narratives of bodies that are clean and bodies that are 'polluted' and 'dirty' (Kang 2023; McClintock 2013; Pandhi 2022).

Indeed, it has long been that in the Indian context lower caste bodies are considered to be 'dark' and 'hairy' and Black men's bodies in South Africa have been often thought about as wild and animalistic, as part of the attempt to justify colonial control and domination (McClintock 2013; Kukreja 2021; Krishnan 2016). Although it is not analytically possible to draw linkages between these colonial tropes and the contemporary moment, what is interesting is to explore how tropes of 'body hair' and masculinity shape notions of what is a desirable and what an undesirable masculinity (Frank 2014). Furthermore, the literature on masculinities suggests that men and their

consumer practices are one of the most lucrative markets for cosmetic and grooming products. Hence there is a global push for 'hairless bodies' of men within the wider neoliberal discourse of masculinities (Philip 2022; Frank 2014). Interestingly, when Taj did upload topless photos of himself, it was quite important to him to make sure that his body was completely hairless and smooth. He explained:

> *The guys like a smooth look because it shows that you take care of your body and yourself. So, if I'm taking topless photos or going out on a date, I make sure I shave everything very nicely and clean. The barber shop can also wax your hair, so if I'm going on holiday or something special like that, I go for a professional wax so that my body is really clean and smooth.*

These commodified practices of the body, which involve the use of consumer products and thus turn men's identities into commodities, must also be represented appropriately on digital platforms. Thabo stated that he blocks people immediately if they have 'out of focus' face photos on Grindr or if they do not know how to take a stylised photo of themselves. He said:

> *If I see someone has taken a selfie and they've not done it properly, like shoved their camera into their face or something like that, then that is a no, I'm not going to be messaging, I'm going to be blocking!! If they don't know the basics of how to take a photo and present themselves, then what is even the point?!*

Some awareness and digital literacy around aesthetics, representation, and presentation were important for such young men and became yet another aspect of what they 'assessed' in other men's profiles. Hence what emerges is not just a specific classed aesthetic of gay masculinities for middle-class gay men but also the production of a commodified queer identity and a broader commodified gay culture which takes on digital forms. As various queer scholars have argued, these commodified queer cultures produce disciplining effects on bodies: they reproduce ideas of heteropatriarchal and capitalist respectability on queer selves and create normative ways of doing, being, and performing sexuality (Duggan 2002; Connell 1992; Dasgupta 2022; H Roy 2021; Rao 2020). Interestingly, these socio-economic and cultural inequalities interact with spatial logics and inequalities afforded by geolocation-based apps like Grindr and its technology, as I seek to develop next.

Geolocating desire

Going back to the vignette with Jacob that opened this article, where he checked his Grindr profile as we were sitting in an upmarket mall in Sandton, the classed position of the mall made it a particularly desirable place to

meet 'like-minded' men. As Jacob commented: 'This is where the real deal is! All the fancy boys come to the mall at the weekend, so this is where I usually meet the guys I like.' For Jacob and several young men like him whom I met and worked with, the urban context was marked by spaces that were desirable and undesirable. These spaces also marked out which queer men and masculinities were associated with them and hence were also desirable. As Jacob declared:

> *I only want to hook up or meet up with guys from a similar background and the Sandton City Mall is a good place to meet such guys … I avoid using Grindr outside the mall because you never know what these other boys want … particularly the poorer township boys … They want you to pick them up, pay for taxis, buy them food or clothes, and all of that nonsense … I don't want to be anyone's sugar daddy or sponsor, you know … They have to pay for their own stuff, and they have to come to my place or meet me in the mall using their own transport, otherwise don't bother meeting me, we won't match.*

For Jacob it is very clear that the only men he seeks to meet or associate with are other men from a similar class position who can afford to travel, consume, and belong in a space like the shopping mall. These are men who are from a similar economic and social background; but, importantly, these are men who are also spatially marked. The mall in the wealthy suburb of Sandton becomes a site that is marked as 'developed', wealthy and desirable in a context of high inequality in South Africa. As various scholars of class and consumption have argued, because of the high levels of poverty and unemployment, consumption and consumer spaces like the mall become important sites to demonstrate class status as upwardly mobile South African citizens (Iqani 2018; Southall 2023). At the same time, the 'township' and 'township boys' become queer masculinities that are not desirable, as the space of the township is marked by poverty and the perpetuation of racialised apartheid-era inequalities (A Desai 2003; Harrison et al. 2014).

For Jacob, then, seeking Grindr profiles of men who are inside the expensive malls of wealthy suburbs like Sandton becomes a good way to filter out men who do not shop or belong there and, thus, do not match his classed and social position. As ethnographic literature on the middle class from the Global South has demonstrated, it is more important to be and belong in the mall than to shop there in order to create a sense of middle classness (Fernandes 2015; Chevalier 2015; Brosius 2012; Gooptu 2013; M Desai 2016). Hence, belonging is not understood in an exclusively economic sense; rather, it is the social and cultural performance of being middle class that is important for creating belonging within these consumer spaces. As a result, a classed hierarchy of masculinities emerges in which men who are seen to

legitimately belong in the mall are framed as desirable. This classed logic works in and through the intersecting inequalities of race to mark out 'township boys' and their masculinities as undesirable. For upwardly mobile Black middle-class young gay men like Jacob and many others like him, the mall then becomes an important space where they can meet other like-minded gay men and create a classed and racialised queer visibility for themselves. Within this relational dynamic, poorer and working class Black gay men are not desirable as they are imagined as embodying poverty, unemployment, and hardship. Gay men and masculinities from the township are deemed as not desirable within this classed and racialised hierarchy of masculinities and desirability.

For several young men in both India and South Africa who end up meeting other gay men in malls and other middle-class spaces, ascertaining their classed belonging was also an important social process facilitated through Grindr. As Thabo discussed for the South African context:

> *I ask people to send me their location as we are chatting on Grindr, right then and there, to show me exactly where they are chatting from. If they are in the township, you know that these are poor guys and that they won't be a match. And if they refuse to send you their location pin that instant, you can also know that they are being suspicious. If you have nothing to hide, then why are they not sharing their location pin?*

This form of digital surveillance, which is facilitated by the inbuilt geolocating features of Grindr, becomes another way of ensuring the classed policing of poor gay men and is an attempt to verify that you are not interacting with a 'township' boy. Another strategy is to ask for WhatsApp numbers and engage in a videocall before meeting. As James reflected:

> *I have written it on my profile, that we have to videocall before meeting, otherwise we are not meeting and in the video call it's fairly easy to see if this guy is decent or not – the way he speaks, looks, acts, etc.*

So, a video call which allows young men to scan the surroundings, accents, and other status markers becomes the way of ensuring that a profile is of a 'genuine' 'classy' guy. This classed policing is enabled by the wider digital infrastructure of communication.

In the Indian context, classed geolocations of desire and desirability were further mirrored in what several participants considered to be 'ideal places' to date, as well as 'ideal suburbs' for young men to come from. In making this argument, a young man called Pradeep observed:

> *When you ask someone where they are on Grindr, they tell you the name of a posh South Delhi colony, but you have to check that they are actually in the colony and not in the urban village next to it! Most of these guys live in these urban villages because they are cheaper to live [in], but they lie about it, they say that they live in the colony … which of course is much more expensive.*

What emerges for Pradeep is a similarly spatially demarcated idea of who is desirable and not along extremely classed and socio-spatial lines. There is an assumption that poorer gay men in India 'lie' about where they live on Grindr and that wealthier middle-class gay Indian men like Pradeep have to 'check' these details before meeting them. In so doing, gay desire, desirability, and respectability take on social and spatial dimensions, facilitated by Grindr and its various technological features. These affordances not just shape and mediate gay intimacies and masculinities but have a quite significant impact on the politics of race, caste, and class inequalities, as I seek to argue next.

Emerging Grindr wars: digitally reproducing race, caste, and class inequalities

Building on Bourdieu's (2010) ideas of symbolic and cultural capital producing hierarchies of 'taste' and distinction, we see a similar social and cultural hierarchy that is emerging within gay digital spaces, working in and through already existing inequalities of race, class, and caste. As I have argued, on the one hand Grindr and dating apps provide gay men a much-needed queer visibility in an oppressive and heteropatriarchal social context. On the other hand, however, this queer visibility operates in relation to wider social, political, and cultural dynamics of contexts which are undergoing rapid neoliberal expansion. As scholars have argued, neoliberalism is causing the inequalities of class, gender, and race to transform in both contexts, with the emergence of a middle class and the development of consumerism, globalised capitalism, and class anxiety (Iqani 2022; Philip 2022; Chevalier 2015; Brosius 2012; Islam 2021; Jaju 2023; Dawson 2014).

Within this broader context of the formation of a 'middle-class' identity in India and South Africa, gay middle-class men embody and imbibe several of these social and cultural anxieties and hierarchies. Indeed, as Andrew Tucker (2009) has argued, the ways in which young middle-class gay men seek to visualise themselves and their sexualities and desires reveals the politics of sexuality and political exchange within specific social, cultural, and political contexts, rather than merely representation or aesthetics. For Tucker 'queer visibility' reveals the ways in which the queer self is constructed and presented in keeping with the wider context of sexual and classed inequality of their contexts. Particularly in countries with already existing high levels of inequality within the Global South, like in India and South Africa, these

inequalities are mirrored by and further shape the forms 'queer visibility' takes on. Hence, in many ways middle-class young men in India and South Africa reproduce various class, caste, and racialised inequalities through their 'queer self' and its 'visibility' as well as its digital representation and embodiment in the form of Grindr profiles and interactions.

For young men like Suraj or Jacob, whom we have met in this article, sexuality intersects and operates with the politics of neoliberal expansion and inequality and takes on digital forms. As we have seen, their commodified selves and identities create sexual and social desire only for other similarly classed bodies on Grindr, reproducing class hierarchies in their respective countries. Narratives of avoiding 'cheap' boys or 'local' boys are often explicitly marked by classed differences in style, aesthetics, lifestyles, and status symbols. The men seek to become 'classy gays' and avoid the 'poor gays'. In this way social and symbolic wars emerge on Grindr wherein these queer visibilities and their inequalities come to the fore to produce tensions, clashes, and anxieties. These 'Grindr wars' do not take on explicitly violent forms but rather demonstrate the profound tensions, clashes, and symbolic violence produced in and through the inequalities of race, class, and caste on dating applications that digitally mediate intimacies and desires.

I also want to emphasise how young men reproduce colonial and racialised apartheid-era tropes about 'townships' on Grindr. For example, as we see in many narratives that my research participants would only meet men from wealthy areas and were avoiding men from the township on account of their being potentially 'dangerous' and 'poor', there is a reproduction of long-established tropes on the criminalisation of Black masculinities in the South African context (Vetten and Ratele 2013). The legacies of colonial and apartheid social relations, as various South African scholars have argued, continue to shape the perception and stereotypes about townships and life within them (Sidloyi 2023; A Desai 2003; Harrison et al. 2014). For Jacob and other young men whom we encounter in this article, these tropes about the township and its racialised imaginaries of danger and violence find new avenues of reproduction through the geolocating affordances of Grindr. As we saw in the previous section, by asking for 'location pins' and rejecting profiles if they are seen to be located in townships, these men and their masculinities become framed as potentially dangerous and hence to be avoided. An exclusionary politics emerges amongst upwardly mobile middle class Black gay men that is directed against poorer Black gay men who live in townships. These poorer Black township men become bodies and identities to be avoided. This exclusionary politics becomes digitally reproduced and enabled through Grindr, especially its application design and its various geolocating features and affordances.

Grindr also allows young Black middle-class men to verify, authenticate, and demonstrate a classed belonging in poorer Black gay men from the town-

ships. As Thabo's narrative demonstrates, for several Black middle-class gay men I worked with, you could not 'trust' anyone on Grindr so that you were required to 'verify' their classed and spatial claims. For Thabo, seeing how people speak, making sure that they are not simply hanging out in the mall but somehow belong there in social and symbolic ways, became a test that other poorer gay men were forced to engage with. Hence through Grindr and its affordances, gay men and profiles that match neoliberal masculinities in 'correct' or 'homonormative' ways (Duggan 2002) of being and presenting are privileged over other bodies and profiles. This, as Rahul Rao (2020) would argue further, is part of the wider social process in emerging postcolonial contexts where an idealised 'homocapitalist' queer subject is emerging. Dating apps such as Grindr privilege these idealised and commodified gay men and masculinities, further entrenching colonial and postcolonial inequalities along racialised, gendered, and classed lines.

A further dimension of racial inequality being reproduced on Grindr and other dating apps is around the role of whiteness. Several young men like Thabo and Kagiso mentioned several times how they regularly came across white South African men on Grindr who explicitly mentioned phrases like 'whites only' or 'preference for whites' on their profiles. Such profiles tend to be visible in the wealthy areas that the Black middle classes inhabit as during apartheid these were formally white-only areas. So, the upwardly mobile middle-class Black gay South African men who inhabit formerly all-white neighbourhoods also face forms of sexualised racism in new and complex ways. In townships where the majority of the population is Black, there are no or very few 'white' profiles that emerge on Grindr, because of its location-based grid system. However, as soon as Thabo or Kagiso are in the malls in Sandton or other wealthy neighbourhoods, which are now becoming more racially mixed, they encounter many more profiles which explicitly seek connections with other white men only.

In this context of increased racial contact between Black and non-Black South Africans, apps like Grindr become a digital space through which racialised inequality and discrimination are reproduced. What is also interesting about these profiles with whites-only preferences was that there is no visible or explicit racial discrimination; the racial undesirability is stated and presented as racial preference which is framed as apolitical and somehow 'natural'. When I discussed such profiles with explicitly racialised sexual preferences with my research participants, they remarked that they would never report or even be able to report such profiles to the Grindr community platforms because of the way the app was structured. As Kagiso stated:

> *Technically these profiles are not doing anything wrong; they are just stating their preference. So it's not a breach of any Grindr community rules. Yeah, it's not a nice thing. But [I am] not*

sure we can do anything about it. I just block such profiles, really.

Similarly, in the Indian context caste-based discrimination and inequality was rampant but not technically in breach of 'community rules', according to my research participants. Suraj and several other young men showed me the multiple profiles that mentioned phrases like 'Jaat man' or 'Gujjar top' to indicate the dominant caste status of these men and framing it as a desirable trait freely marketed on Grindr. Several profiles turned their dominant caste status into desirable qualities that would allegedly make them more appealing. Interestingly several of these dominant caste profiles used language of being 'top' or active and penetrating partners within penetrative sex to further build on these caste groups as 'superior' and 'macho' masculinities. They play on the idea of Jaat and Gujjar men as being more macho masculine, hence further framing their masculinity as desirable because it was seen as manly and virile. In contrast, several profiles also explicitly mentioned desire for 'white skin' or 'light skin'. This reproduces caste-centred tropes of lower castes being associated with darker skin that feminists and queer scholars have written (Subramanian 2015). What is also important in these contexts is that there is no 'official or legal' crime of caste discrimination that takes place, yet deeply powerful social and cultural wars are taking place on Grindr that create caste-based exclusions and hurt. Hence a complex dynamic emerges where inequalities of race, class, and caste are reproduced and arguably amplified and manifested in novel ways, raising important questions which require further probing and analytical attention.

Conclusion

This article explores how young middle-class gay men in urban India and South Africa use Grindr to create and present their digital queer selves, whilst also constructing exclusions and hierarchies. It critically unpacks the digitised commodification of gay cultures and gay identities in India and South Africa, which are both undergoing intense and rapid neoliberal expansion, and examines how these changes are manifest online within dating applications like Grindr. It demonstrates that several social and symbolic 'Grindr Wars' take place on Grindr, reproducing the already existing inequalities of race, class, and caste in complex ways within commodified gay cultures. Hence dating apps like Grindr provide an important site for gay connectivity and identity but also amplify and reproduce hierarchies, clashes, and inequalities in the online sphere in complex and novel ways. This comparative ethnographic perspective demonstrates that the increasing commodification and digitisation of gay and queer cultures in the Global South requires further probing and research to unpack the changing nature of everyday social life, intimacies, and sexualities in these postcolonial contexts.

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