

Slumdog romance: Facebook love and digital privacy at the margins

Media, Culture & Society

2017, Vol. 39(3) 408–422

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DOI: 10.1177/0163443717691225

journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs



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Abstract

Facebook has consolidated its position as the one-stop-shop for social activity among the poor in the global South. Sex, romance, and love are key motivations for mobile and Internet technology usage among this demographic, much like the West. Digital romance is a critical context through which we gain fresh perspectives on Internet governance for an emerging digital and globalizing public. Revenge porn, slut-shaming, and Internet romance scams are a common and growing malady worldwide. Focusing on how it manifests in diverse digital cultures will aid in the shaping of new Internet laws for a more inclusive cross-cultural public. In specific, this article examines how low-income youth in two of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) nations – Brazil and India – exercise and express their notions on digital privacy, surveillance, and trust through the lens of romance. This allows for a more thorough investigation of the relationship between sexuality, morality, and governance within the larger Facebook ecology. As Facebook becomes the dominant virtual public sphere for the world's poor, we are compelled to ask whether inclusivity of the digital users comes at the price of diversity of digital platforms.

Keywords

Facebook, governance, Internet regulation, revenge porn, romance, slut-shaming

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Introduction

Love, sex, and romance are and always have been key in the adoption and use of new media technologies. Pornography, social networking, and dating sites are popular Internet sites across the globe. Romance breeds new economies in the West – we find ourselves in the age of Tinder, Grindr, Hinge, Hitch, and OkCupid. However, when it comes to the global south, the story has a different twist. With Facebook's Free Basics initiative providing free access to select sites to the poor in the developing world, it has consolidated its position as the one-stop-shop for social activity, including romance. In Myanmar, for instance, citizens were asked whether they use the Internet. Majority reported in the negative, but when asked whether they use Facebook, the answer was an overwhelming yes (Mirani, 2015). Facebook is *their* Internet. While romance serves as a prime driver for Internet adoption in these contexts, few browse for a partner outside Facebook's walled gardens.

Most young men in poor communities from Jordan to India have barely spoken to a girl outside their family circle (Arora and Rangaswamy, 2015; Bhattacharjya and Ganesh, 2009; Kaya, 2009). Online chatting may be the only avenue of being in touch with the opposite sex. Girls in patriarchal societies resist open communities online as they seek anonymity, atomization, and autonomy which otherwise is hard to come by in these sexually segregated societies (Mishra and Basu, 2014).

While the West have had privacy laws in place since the 1970s, the emerging markets are only now seriously grappling with this phenomenon (Reuben and Wright, 2014). Affordable mobile technologies and a plethora of pre-paid cell phone plans have brought much of their citizenry onto the digital sphere within the last 5 years. Today, even the poor are digitally connected. As with many laws, the personal becomes political as it is more graspable to the lay public. Sex is perhaps the most visceral area that triggers moral panic and expedites privacy regulation on the Internet with the fear of revenge porn and child pornography at the forefront (Akdeniz, 2013).

Since Facebook serves as *the Internet* to the majority of the world's marginalized demographic (Mirani, 2015), it will continue to take center stage. Thereby, we argue that there is a deep connect between Internet governance in the global south and the regulation of Facebook. Given the collapse of platform diversity within these deprived contexts, Facebook is at once both a public sphere for romance and state control on morality. Their administrators are facilitators for activism as well as instruments of authoritarian and patriarchal regimes. The global south is not unified on matters of sexuality, moral codes of conduct, and gender rights, and yet, they continue to be addressed repeatedly as a monolithic whole.

While it is helpful to go beyond the West to critically examine Internet norms, it is also worth reconfiguring our understandings of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) nations as this relates to a global polity of sexuality. We should examine how this manifests in diverse digital cultures that propel new Internet laws for a more inclusive cross-cultural public. The focus on the poor is essential as it is well documented that low-income communities especially in the global south have long served as test beds for surveillance techniques by the state (Eubanks, 2014). By making visible the narratives among this populace, we can endeavor to make transparent the struggles in constructing what is private and public among this chronically surveyed citizenry.

Hence, this article examines how marginalized youth in two of the BRICS nations – Brazil and India – exercise and express their notions on digital privacy, surveillance, and trust through the lens of romance. This allows for a more thorough investigation of the relationship between sexuality, morality, and governance within the larger Facebook ecology. As Facebook becomes the dominant virtual public sphere for the world's poor, we are compelled to ask whether inclusivity of the digital users comes at the price of diversity of digital platforms. In other words, as Facebook allows for greater digital participation among low-socio-economic status (SES) populations, is it narrowing the debate on privacy by centering it on its unique platform structures and politics?

Overall, we argue that digital romance is a critical context through which we gain fresh perspectives on Internet governance for an emerging digital and globalizing public. By capturing the voices of the poor, we gain insight into the future of surveillance and privacy rights, particularly in an area that is of deep import to the larger public – the governance of digital romance.

Why low-income urban spaces in the global south as sites of investigation

While there is substantial research about online privacy, digital romance, and Internet regulation, it predominately focuses on the West (Arora, 2012; Bhattacharjya and Ganesh, 2009; Kumar, 2014; Reuben and Wright, 2014). Little data exists beyond this geographic region, and even less so among youth from low-income families. To put into perspective the relevance of this gap in research, 60% of the world's 6 billion population fall within the parameters of low income (living off US\$2 per day) and live in the global south (World Bank, 2014). Of the world's youth population, 85% who are 25 years old or younger reside in this region.

It is forecasted that by 2020, the majority of digital data will come from such emerging economies and young users who have in the last decade gained access to the Internet due to the high penetration of mobile phones in these regions (GSM Association (GSMA), 2014). Current research in these contexts continue to emphasize farmers checking crop prices online or women checking health information for their children and themselves, framing these users as utilitarian beings (Arora and Rangaswamy, 2013; 2014). However, recent fieldwork reveal that far from pragmatic usage, even the most marginalized users are immersed in non-instrumental digital behaviors and sites, often with Facebook at the center stage (Ganesh, 2010; Kolko and Racadio, 2014; Kumar, 2014; Rangaswamy and Arora, 2015; Tully and Ekdale, 2014). A 2014 Geopoll study reported that most poor in the global south believe that Facebook is *the Internet* and few venture outside this platform (Mirani, 2015). Their current web browsing statistics indicate that much of their online activity is oriented toward entertainment, play, pleasure, and sociality.

Our aim is to shed light on the perceptions and behaviors of this underrepresented voice regarding online privacy and Internet regulation, with romance serving as a key instrument in technological adoption and usage. The poor have long served as the litmus test of surveillance and a communal group subject to ongoing intrusive programs in the name of empowerment and public safety. As Eubanks (2014) argues,

The most sweeping digital surveillance technologies are designed and tested in what could be called ‘low rights environments’ – poor communities, repressive social programs, dictatorial regimes, and military and intelligence operations – where there are low expectations of political accountability and transparency ... many of these technologies are first developed for the U.S. military to deploy in the global south, and later tested for civilian purposes on marginal communities in the United States. (p. 2)

Hence, if we are to look at Internet regulation, we need to pay special heed to the voices from below. This study is based on youth living in low-income formal and informal neighborhoods that the United Nations (UN) refers to as slums in India and Brazil. It defines a slum household as ‘one that lacks any of the following five elements: access to improved water, access to improved sanitation, security of tenure, durability of housing, and sufficient living area’ (Martin and Mathema, 2009). Most slums are situated in the global south. In Brazil, a slum is a type of informal settlement that falls under the larger umbrella term ‘favela’. Favelas historically have broadly been defined as illegal squatter settlements. In today’s context, this definition is inadequate in light of recent government policies – such as *Minha Casa* and *Minha Vida* – aimed at legitimizing informal spaces and legalizing land and home ownership among residents (Loureiro et al., 2013).

The infrastructure of slums generally entails makeshift shacks constructed of bricks, garbage, and other discarded material, built in close proximity to the city. Other defining characteristics of this social construction involve specific entry points, an occupying population of low-income residents and, in the context of Brazil, high rates of violence due to rivaling drug factions and clashes with the police (Goldstein, 2013). In both contexts, residents tend to live in high-density spaces and, in the case of India, share mobile phones with multiple users (Rangaswamy and Cutrell, 2013). This compels a sensitization on the cultural and socio-economic specificities on the notion and materialization of privacy in one’s day-to-day lives. These spatial configurations and social conditions shape the daily realities of residents, which inevitably influence their perspectives on issues related to privacy, freedom of expression, surveillance, and trust. Such perspectives naturally influence their behavior, both in digital and in non-digital contexts.

Method

Data for this text are extracted from a larger study that focuses on perceptions about privacy and online behaviors among low-income youth in Brazil and India. It hinges on the case studies of 22 participants between the ages of 14 and 27, who live in peripheral spaces in two cities in Brazil – Belo Horizonte and Rio de Janeiro – and 22 participants who live in outer suburban areas (peri-urban areas) in India – 12 from Isnapur, which is a small town 30 miles from the city of Hyderabad in South India and 10 from the city of Ludhiana in North India.

We relied on a myriad of ethnographic methods, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, photo-documenting participants’ cell phones, their neighborhoods and homes, and participant observation of Facebook activity. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The semi-structured interviews gave us insight into the

participants' perspectives on privacy and freedom of speech in the digital sphere, as well as demographic information and insights into their day-to-day online life.

After analyzing interview data, we conducted a series of focus groups to delve deeper into the core questions of our study and to ask participants to make sense of some of the findings from the initial individual interviews. Photo-documenting cell phones allowed us to record security measures via privacy settings. It also allowed us to triangulate interview data about Internet usage, based on the apps that the participants had downloaded and described as most frequently used.

We recruited the 12 informants in Belo Horizonte from a night school program for non-traditional students, where they were enrolled. All of the interviews were conducted at the school. The Rio de Janeiro participants were recruited through community leaders who had access to youth who met the parameters of our study. The interviews were conducted at two different community centers and an educational program site. Participants from Isnapur were recruited from public squares and playgrounds and in Ludhiana from a low-income population segment of college-going youth and in blue-collar jobs. Throughout this article, we use pseudonyms to refer to the research participants in order to protect their anonymity.

Results and discussion

In both contexts, youth struggled to define privacy. There is no obvious translation of this vocabulary in their local languages. The standard response initially was 'no idea' to what they consider as private and public, but they started to situate privacy based on the medium through which their messages are sent: usually, this translated to them using messenger apps for private and Facebook for public communication. Facebook is a public sphere to them. However, the Indian and Brazilian context deeply diverge when it comes to privacy concerns and practices, with the Brazilian participants being far more cautious and distrustful of the Internet than the Indian counterpart as is illustrated in the sections below.

Trust of digital information appears to be far more pervasive among the Indian than the Brazilian participants. Our select group of Indian youth almost always reveal all of their real information, while the Brazilian participants are more cautious. While they also give their real names, they are more prone to distrusting people and institutions on the Internet. As Raquel from Rio states, 'there are many people that use it [Internet] for evil'. The Brazilian youth are more protective of their privacy and do not share their cell phones as freely with others. According to Carlos,

I don't like that people touch my personal stuff. Because they will start looking at my personal stuff. And I do not let them. If they want to see something, I, myself, will show them. I do not let them use it.

However, when in relationships, many of our Brazilian participants share their passwords with their partner.

Romance is a dominant theme that emerged from our data, warranting a special focus, particularly as it relates to articulations on privacy. These two contexts often fall on the

opposite sides of the spectrum when it comes to romance, dating, and sexuality. These divergent norms and online behaviors reveal the problematics of analyzing digital privacy within the BRICS as a consolidated and unified social value to guide in the making of Internet regulation for the emerging markets.

Friending strangers, fake love, and detecting deception

Friending strangers seems like one of the many Internet myths that got dismissed as platform practices played out and matured. Most Facebook studies in the West have revealed that online networks are mostly an extension of existing social networks, including weak social ties (Boyd and Marwick, 2014; Knowles et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2012; Manago et al., 2012). Yet, recent studies focusing on marginalized youth beyond the West have revealed that Facebook becomes an aspirational geography where disadvantaged youth seek to connect and expand their networks well beyond their limited social capital. For instance, youth in the slums of Hyderabad and Chennai

... searched for new friends based on familiar names or were happy to friend request any Indian person. Certainly others mentioned an interest in making friends with people far away, as a teenaged boy put it '... I will look for and friend certain names ... Like Jack or John for instance ...' For our young informants, Facebook engagements are gateways to unimaginable opportunities: composing second selves, making friendships and forging diasporic interactions. More importantly, underlying all these on-line activities is the urge to seek aspirationally endowing interactions with people from an elevated social status. (Rangaswamy and Arora, 2015: 9–10)

Similarly, Kumar (2014) found that low-SES youth in India were able to circumvent their caste, education status, and economic background and communicate with strangers around the world with the help of Google Translate. She underlines that a major motivation for using Facebook's unlimited real-time chatting with these strangers was due to new government regulations in 2012 that no mobile user could send more than 200 short message services (SMSs) per day. A comparative study between Namibia and US youth revealed that while the latter did not friend strangers due to privacy issues (except 'known strangers' who shared common social spaces and groups), the Namibian youth did as it was considered rude to reject requests (Peters et al., 2015).

Our findings from the Indian context are consistent with these revelations. In fact, among the Indian youth, a quarter of their friends on Facebook are people they have never met nor expect to meet. Their friending decisions are based on profile photos and the nature of their posts: status updates most desired are those that are inspirational and spiritual sayings, romantic posts, and jokes. The Brazil youth, on the contrary, communicated and demonstrated far more reserve toward strangers and, for the most part, do not accept stranger's requests for friendship much like the US youth on similar grounds of privacy.

Friendship is usually the pathway for more romantic inclinations in the Indian context compared to the Brazilian counterpart. While the Brazilian context has more relaxed social norms on sexuality and dating among the sexes, Indian youth are still subject to arranged marriages and there are strong protocols and barriers in communicating with

the opposite sex. This creates high motivation for the Indian youth to reach out to the opposite sex who are strangers online. That said, girls are more cautious than boys. Some worry about their reputation: 'if someone sends vulgar messages to my account, it will affect my social status'. Some have migrated from one account to another because of strangers who started to stalk them: 'I used to have an account which I removed because it became a head ache to manage it because of strangers'. In addition, girls are more likely to put restrictions on photos when sharing compared to the boys.

Of course, with friending strangers, opportunities of deception surface. Facebook carves new spaces for pleasure as well as new vulnerabilities. 'Concerns about online deception are as old as the Internet itself', argues Toma and Hancock (2012: 78). The disembodied nature of online communication increases the opportunities for deception. False self-representation is a well-documented, common, and global social practice as both women and men invest tremendous effort to position themselves as desirable in this highly competitive romance economy (Ellison et al., 2012; Gil-Or et al., 2015; Toma et al., 2008). For instance, among Germans, women are more likely to misrepresent their physical attractiveness and men are more likely to misrepresent information on marital status, intended relationship, and height (Schmitz et al., 2013).

Much of this can be harmless. However, deception when done systematically to scam people with the promise of love can be tremendously destructive at an emotional, psychological, and financial level, and generally devastating when concerning the youth. Koon and Yoong (2013) have identified a new cyber-crime known as Internet romance scams (IRs) in Malaysia where the scammers' prime intent is to prey on the lonely and desperate and defraud them of large sums of money. The Royal Malaysian Police (RMP) reports that in 2012 alone, 846 IRs cases were recorded with a total loss of RM32.09 million (around US\$7,000,000), and there may be more that have gone unreported. In our case site, Hyderabad, IRs have become so common that the police were compelled to set up a website with instructions for online users on how to detect and protect themselves from such incidents.¹ This is by no means a global south problem. Worldwide, there are serious spikes in romance frauds, with Canada reporting a 1500% upsurge in romance scam complaints since 2008 and the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) reporting how romance scammers defrauded an accumulated total of AUD\$20.9 million (approximately US\$15,000,000) from their victims on an annual basis (p. 29).

Friending strangers on Facebook is a powerful strategy to initiate such scams. According to a study from Cloudmark, nearly 40% of new Facebook profiles are fake, created by malware writers and spammers (Chakraborty et al., 2014). In our research, romance frauds, albeit at a smaller scale, are a common malady among the youth in the Indian slums. Fake girl profiles are set up to lure the ones keen on companionship. The game here is to promise love in exchange for recharging a mobile. The 'fake girl' friends a young man and chats with him. Some send photos and say that they are single and desperate for love. Then, as Raj, a young Indian man puts it, 'I ask if we can meet? They say "can you help me with something" and finally they ask for a recharge'. This has compelled a steep learning curve among these young men on detecting fake from authentic profiles on Facebook. Sanjiv, another young man from the slum, shares his deception

detection strategy: ‘if you send “how are you” to fake accounts, their reply will be “hot” almost all the time. We can tell they are fake directly’.

Interestingly, while there is much literature on damaging forms of deception and the building of false trustworthiness and credibility (Afroz et al., 2012; Guadagno et al., 2012), research on the detection of deception by the recipients has been sparse, and within online environments even rarer (Koon and Yoong, 2013). As we can see from the above narratives, the young male participants in the Indian slums in a short period of time have developed a system of detection of online romance deception, compelling us to view privacy not just as a social value and cultural practice but as a dynamic literacy. This framing can enable us to go beyond the tiresome global north and global south divide in our understandings on digital privacy and romance in the makings of Internet regulation.

The politics of kissing, slut-shaming, and revenge porn

Another area of vulnerability is revenge porn, the non-consensual sharing of sexual content posted and distributed online of the person featured, with the purpose of shaming (Levendowski, 2014). While this practice is pervasive worldwide, it far more frequently results in deadly consequences in patriarchal societies in the global south. A common practice is to ‘slut-shame’ the victim. For instance, as early as 2009, Muttalik of the conservative right-wing Hindu religious party in India suggested that the young women have themselves to blame as they have been ‘corrupted by technologies’ – their inappropriate use of their cell phones have made them ‘sluts’. The digital sphere is seen as complicit. Here, ‘sluttiness’ is tied ‘not to sexual practices but to the presence of women in particular spaces and company’ (Shah, 2015: 4). With this perspective, Facebook is seen as imbued with an intrinsic digital culture of loose morality and an extension of Western public space including pubs and bars, which bring together the sexes in ways that challenge so-called Indian values and cultures.

As a response, a critical mass of Indian women, tired of these forced cultural and gender stereotypes, took to Facebook and launched the ‘Pink Chaddi’ (Hindi for underwear) Campaign to tie these understandings to issues of gender violence. This campaign provoked participants to form a ‘Love Sena’ (a love army, playing with the ‘Shiv Sena’ or Hindu army terminology of the Hindu extremist party) to collect pink underwear and send it to the headquarters of this party, gaining a quick following of 58,000 members in the initial days. This is hardly a stand-alone event. In 2014, the ‘Kiss of love’ Campaign was launched on Facebook as a reaction to an incident in Kerala where the Hindu-right party sent a mob of attackers to demolish a coffee shop to condemn ‘alleged immoral activity’ of public kissing on their premises. This created street protests across different cities, defying this conservative outlook.

In contrast, the Brazilian context has far less gender segregation and sexuality is more open and permissive. Even then, sexuality issues matter and have impact on Internet regulation. For instance, public anxieties about child pornography became pivotal for pushing legal initiatives to control Internet traffic in 2009 (Medeiros and Bygrave, 2015). Media events such as the suicide of 17-year-old Julia Rebecca after the posting of the video online of her having sex with other minors pushed the revenge porn bill into

motion. A recent court ruling in Brazil banned 'Secret', the app that allows content such as this to be posted anonymously online. The court ordered Apple and Google to remove this app from their online services. In 2014, Brazil formulated a more sophisticated version of the Civil Framework for the Internet called 'Marco Civil', incorporating protections for users including against 'slut-shaming'.

With these cultural events ongoing in our select sites, we found that young women in the Indian context were far more sympathetic to the women in released sex videos compared to the Brazilian counterpart. There was a shared feeling of camaraderie toward these women, viewed clearly as victims of these public violations; 'I find it very wrong. It's their personal life and nobody has a right to judge' said Aysha from Isnapur, echoing a common sentiment. However, our fieldwork in Brazil revealed that many women blamed women, partly or fully, for the release of revenge porn videos. Sandra from Belo Horizonte, like many of our participants, believed that in today's modern age, women were clearly at fault, as they should know better when using mobile technologies: 'guilty is the person who let the other person take his or her picture, for sure'. Several (male and female participants) put the blame on the girl: 'Of course. The girl sending nude photos to her boyfriend is at fault'.

Predominately, the perspective was that of shared guilt: 'if I need to say who is to blame, I would say that the person who shares this content and the woman who allows these pics are both wrong'. A few evoked their right to privacy in such discussions. While acknowledging self-blame, Elena from Rio stated clearly that it is a matter of rights. 'I made the video with my boyfriend, we broke up and he posted it. Even though I'm wrong, I'm gonna go after my rights, because my image is there. Everybody has the right, so here nobody is a saint'.

One way of viewing the Brazilian outlook is female complicity in the system of patriarchy. Webb (2015) argues that the reason women have been complicit in slut-shaming of other women for their sexual behavior is that by doing so, social benefits are conferred upon them. Armstrong et al. (2014) have argued that at times it is a matter of status where women participating in slut-shaming is a performance to 'maintain their sexual privilege in high-status spaces' (p. 134). Yet, from our fieldwork, this apparently does not apply to the Indian context. Hence, female complicity is not sufficient or adequate an explanation to comprehend these divergent perspectives on slut-shaming.

With few public spheres of permissibility and the dearth of gender agency in controlling one's choices as in the Indian context, can one argue that this results in more consolidated gender camaraderie than in the Brazilian site? The public sphere here appears to be synonymous with patriarchy dictating so-called 'Indian values'. For instance, a young male participant in India when asked about his view on the Kiss of love Campaign responded by saying that 'we don't need that culture, we are Indians we have some standards. If I am an American I would have supported it'. Another remarked on the public display of affection that 'if they want to kiss, why don't they go to their home and kiss there?' Ironically, home in the context of low-income dwellings are often just as public as it is hard to escape family surveillance in one-room homes.

Kaya (2009) argues about the fragility and temporal nature of public space in patriarchal societies for women where even an inappropriate male gaze can transform what is deemed public into an intensely private moment. 'While a woman's modesty dictates

that men should not glance at her, she cannot expect this level of respect from strangers who have no obligations to her' (p. 260). Hence, there is a constant state of vulnerability for women where even the most public domain can at any moment in time become private, situating their behavior as a violation to the norms dictating that space. This creates a perennial fear of violating the public sphere under patriarchal surveillance. Given that traditionally women's morality has been usurped as men's 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu, 1977), privacy becomes the protection of female virtue. The public realm becomes a deeply gendered space. Therefore, we can never talk about privacy without talking about gender equality as Lever (2015) compellingly argues.

Hence, a more opportune lens could be to draw from Indian feminist literature that has emerged in the last two decades, demanding a more emancipatory politics and agency in shaping their narratives concerning their sexuality (Oza, 2001; Vijayakumar, 2013). There has been a call to decouple Indian nationhood from gender as it struggles to be both modern and non-Western by freezing gender values; 'nation-global distinctions are gendered so that the nation is coded as enclosed and feminine while the global is coded as free floating and masculine, mirroring the public-private divide' (p. 1085). Why our Indian female participants responded this way may be indicative of the changing status of women as they carve a larger public presence by participating in the job sphere and other realms of social life that were once marked as masculine.

While this pursuit is outside the scope of this article, it is well worth exploring further as these contrasting responses between the Brazil and Indian female participants may reveal a richer outlook on analyzing privacy beyond the conventional trappings of the global north-south divide. We need to see this as part of a larger ecology of sexuality that involves the state, gender norms, and the culture of private and the public, allowing for more varied forms of expression across the spectrum.

Facebook being a digital and public domain serves simultaneously as an extension of conventional norms and expectations dictating the traditional public sphere as well as a recalibrated space for new and diverse forms of sexual expression and re-gendering of public space through anonymity and protest as in the campaigns described above. This is part of a longer lineage of the role of technological innovation abetting sexual deviance well before the Internet (Bhattacharjya and Ganesh, 2009). For instance, telephones in homes created new forms of privacy for women with their suitors in the 19th and 20th centuries in a social climate of being chaperoned in public for marital prospects (Marwin, 1988). Hence, when attempting to regulate digital space, one needs to go beyond dialogues on censorship and pornography to a conversation that entails the 'organizing for sexual rights, information on sexual health, self-expressions of sexuality ... crucial to the exercise of the right to freedom of expression and sexuality rights' (Bhattacharjya and Ganesh, 2009: 4).

One suggestion on regulating Internet space on the grounds of protecting the victims of sexual content made public online is to consider the non-voluntary sharing of sexual content as an act of copyright infringement (Levendowski, 2014: 426):

A survey of 864 revenge porn victims revealed that more than eighty percent of revenge porn images are 'selfies', meaning that the author and the subject are the same. Because an estimated 80 percent of revenge porn images are 'selfies', meaning that the subject and the photographer are one and the same, the vast majority of victims can use copyright law to protect themselves.

While this ‘personal property’ angle is an innovative perspective on the regulation of digital sexuality, the problem becomes cultural as several patriarchal societies in the global south have a long history of viewing the woman as ‘property’ implicitly or explicitly in their legal frameworks. Hence, Internet regulations on sexuality need to confront larger legal systems and values embedded within these normative constructs. The balkanized approach to regulating sexuality on the Internet confronts the more globalized approach to privacy as a human rights issue requiring a major re-hauling of laws that are gendered within diverse social systems.

Concluding thoughts

Regulation seems like the antithesis of romance. Courtship falls within the gray zone where culture dictates how intimacy is communicated and comprehended both publicly and privately. Micro-fraud through false self-representations is committed on a quotidian basis across cultures as youth seek to optimize the digital sphere to maximize their desirability for their prospects. Few would fault the youth on their capitalizing of Facebook to explore their sexuality, and some would celebrate these new media outlets as a much-needed safe zone for freedom of expression and gender activism. The system of informal rules governing online behavior of romance is thereby a product and process of particular digital cultures of engagement.

However, when it comes to minors and sexuality online, most cultural contexts support the formalizing of rules of governance on privacy to protect the youth from harm. Yet, privacy as protection in terms of preserving women’s ‘virtue’ is problematic. Protection becomes the legitimacy of traditional morality and the protection of patriarchy. Terms such as ‘revenge porn’ and ‘slut shaming’ launch the dialogue from a gendered point of view, leading to more conservative forms of regulation. A rights-based approach emphasizing equality is a far more fruitful path as it entails a shift from what should be preserved to what should be enabled. At its core, a rights-based approach is about respecting the basic dignity of all individuals. Such a perspective encourages regulation that fosters an autonomous yet socially responsible virtual global citizenship.

When addressing privacy, romance, and Internet governance, we have become accustomed to demarcating these discourses along lines of the West and the rest or regional whether it is the BRICS nations or the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region for instance. While the BRICS or emerging markets were coined as terms to move away from postcolonial rhetoric such as the ‘third world’ and ‘developing countries’, they are now being reified through regional politics. The balkanization has begun in earnest:

The EU is developing a General Data Protection Regulation that would unify data protection under a single European law. The BRICS cable, a 21,000 mile, 12.8 Terabyte per second fiber system connecting Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, and Miami – is creating an alternative data pipeline to lower the cost of communication among major economies of the global south and provide non-U.S. routes for world communications. (Eubanks, 2014: 3)

There appears to be a clear dividing line between the global north and the global south. Yet, our data reveal that privacy perceptions among Brazilian youth resemble

more the youth in the United States than in India. There is much in common in gender issues between the WANA and South Asian region than with Latin America. However, there are also global trends that pervade across borders such as IRSs, revenge porn, and child pornography, warranting a more global and inclusive approach to policy-making in this digital and transnational economy. Furthermore, it is worth keeping in mind that the low-SES youth, in India or Brazil, are a deeply diverse group within these regional contexts – from card holding homosexuals, who have fearlessly come out for romance, to aspiring girls and boys yearning to learn about their own sexuality.

For inclusivity and diversity to co-exist, we need to go beyond the framing of privacy as a socio-cultural value to that which is a literacy. We define literacy as a socially situated process of learning that involves cognitive, digital, and social abilities, which enable learners to successfully engage in new communities across contexts that emerge in this contemporary age. Privacy as a literacy allows for a more dynamic interpretation of culture built on the ongoing learning among communities of new technologies within a specific space and time. This allows us to acknowledge and capture the learning curve of young men confronting new digital phenomena like Facebook love scams or young girls negotiating and experimenting with the new digital sphere to carve public spaces that can be safe and playful by anonymously exploring their sexual interests. Romance is a critical incentive for the youth and thereby an important context within which these literacies need to be observed. By acknowledging the continuities of communicative flows across places, artifacts, and people, we can move toward framing regulation not on what is but on what can and should be.

Acknowledgements

For the Brazil fieldwork, we wish to thank Lucas Dutra and Rogerio Rodrigues for their excellent assistance with data collection. We also thank Roldolfo Rocha, Luis Nascimento and Professor Agnez Saraiva for making the necessary arrangements to conduct interviews. For the India fieldwork, we wish to thank Prem Reddy and Mohit Dagga for their excellent assistance with data collection. Moreover, we are deeply indebted to Dr. Nimmi Rangaswamy, Senior Researcher at Xerox Research India and Professor at IIT Hyderabad, for her supervision of the fieldwork in India.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

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