

Digital Media and Sexual Health Promotion among MSM and Transgender Women in India: Exploring the Contours of Online Interventions

P. Dhall¹, R. K. Dasgupta², J. Harrison-Quintana³

¹Varta Trust, Leadership and management of the organization, Kolkata, India; ²Loughborough University, Institute of Media and Creative Industries, Loughborough, United Kingdom;

³Grindr for Equality, Leadership and management of the organization, Washington, United States

Background

- Digital sphere now plays major role in sexual norms and practices among MSM and trans women in India
- Digital media have become crucial for information dissemination and community mobilization around queer health and rights concerns in last 20 years



Snapshot of queer online forums and campaigns in India

It is worth noting that the Indian queer movement in the last two decades grew almost simultaneously with the growth of new media (Dasgupta, 2017)

- **National Strategic Plan for HIV/AIDS and STI (2017-18 to 2023-24)**, NACO also recognizes need for online sexual health promotion
- **But stigma against queer people persists:**

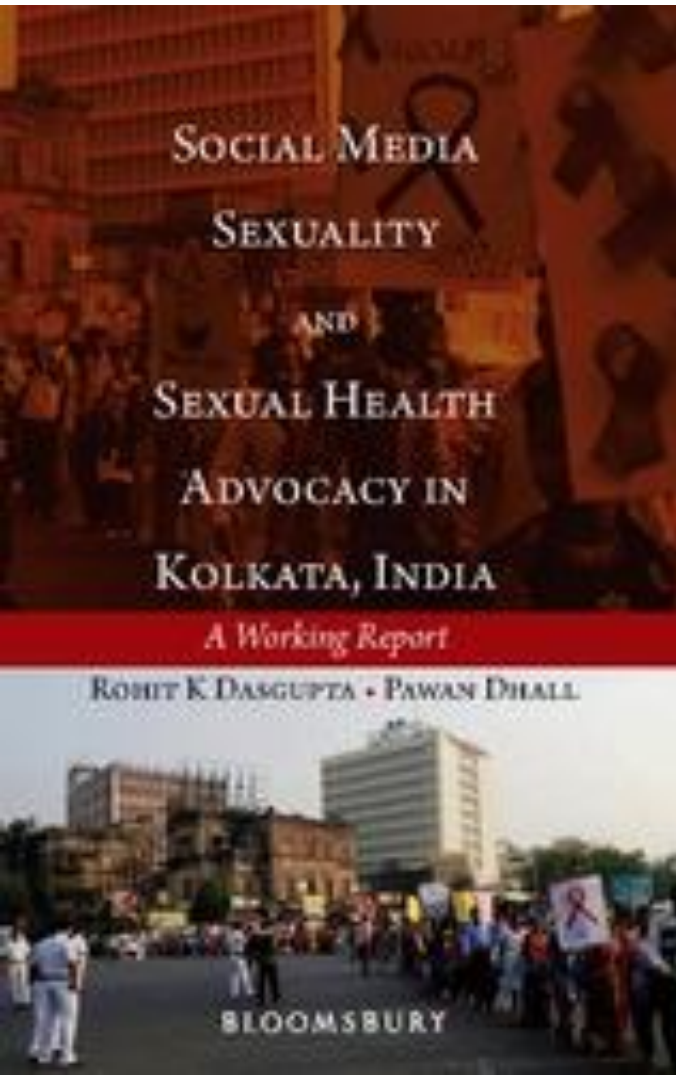
Social exclusion	Discriminatory laws
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Family violence, eviction from home, denial of inheritance- Denial of shelter, including rented accommodation- Property ownership barriers- Exclusion from education, skills building, livelihood- Barriers to healthcare, social welfare and sanitation access- Barriers to freedom of access to public spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Criminalization: Section 377 IPC, obscenity, sex work, anti-vagrancy- Supreme Court recognized trans rights (NALSA, 2014) but State agencies still failing on inclusion in terms of desired gender identity- No legal recognition for non-normative marriages and families- Poor protection from blackmail, same-sex rape, partner violence- Government attempts at censoring digital spaces

Sexual and mental health impact:

- HIV prevalence in MSM 4.3% and trans women 8.82% which was 17 and 34 times overall adult prevalence of 0.26% (NACO, 2015)
- Mental Healthcare Act 2017 emphasizes non-discrimination against queer people but impact of exclusion and violence on mental health and HIV vulnerability yet to be measured
- Laws/protocols for legal/medical gender transition in grey zone → Poor quality and expensive services → Trans people face health complications (sometimes fatal) and other access barriers

Description

- In 2016-18, Varta Trust, a gender-sexuality advocacy non-profit in Kolkata (eastern India) undertook:
 - Formative qualitative research
 - Pilot digital media interventions
- **Objective:** To assess possibilities for design of digital sexual health interventions for MSM and trans women
- **First step:** Qualitative study in 2016 in Greater Kolkata with support from Wellcome Trust, UK



- **Study methodology:**
 - Study guided by digital ethnography and HIV intervention experiences; learning from community interface through Varta webzine (vartagensex.org) and offline awareness generation activities
 - Desk review; participant observations; 4 FGDs (n = 10); 10 semi-structured interviews; purposive sample of outreach workers, counsellors, activists, media persons
- **Findings fine-tuned through a symposium on digital media and health at Jadavpur University, Kolkata**

Lessons Learned

- **Study published:** *Social Media, Sexuality and Sexual Health Advocacy in Kolkata, India – A Working Report* (Rohit K. Dasgupta, Pawan Dhall, 2017, Bloomsbury)
- **It explained digital media's role in:**
 - Transforming and speeding up sexual networking, sex work operations among MSM/trans women in Kolkata
 - Often eliminating need for physical cruising/soliciting

“In small places like Malda, this issue of few people using smart phones will be applicable. But even on the escort site I mentioned, there are people from remote interiors. Someone from Habra contacted me – he wasn't smart in the conventional way – but he contacted me through the escort site” – Respondent in FGD with outreach workers

- **Respondents emphasized digital media interventions that address:**
 - Sexual health beyond just STI/HIV testing/treatment
 - Hitherto neglected mental health, social exclusion and violence related drivers of HIV vulnerability
 - Gender transition needs of trans communities
 - Issues of family support and relationship counselling
 - Needs of hidden sections of MSM and trans women who may not self-identify as part of these communities
 - Issues of client confidentiality and service provider sensitivity and trustworthiness

“There are issues of ethics and confidentiality. Let's say the government gives a grant to a CBO to set up a digital intervention linked to an interactive voice response system where clients calling in have their phone numbers captured. That would be problematic” – Respondent in an FGD with sexual health workers

- **Preferred media:** Websites (with e-helpline/chat facilities or access to phone helpline); WhatsApp; Facebook; dating apps; SMS – tailored to beneficiary age, education, class and digital literacy skills

- **Study inspired pilots on Varta website with links on Grindr app – user response confirmed digital intervention potential:**



- 1) Online database on queer-friendly sexual health, mental health and legal aid services in India
- 2) Guide to tackle online and offline gay blackmail



Conclusions

- Digital media interventions needed to match changes in sexual networking among MSM and trans women
- Who should play what role in such interventions?

- **Technical and ethical protocols:** Civil society groups and government jointly
- **Implementation:** Civil society (community groups)
- **Technical and funding support:** Government, donors

- Such interventions may also help reach sub-groups inaccessible through physical sexual health outreach
- But these interventions can have their own set of challenges around:
 - Lack of digital literacy among beneficiaries
 - Lack of technological affordance and expertise
 - Trust in online information sources
 - Lack of government institutionalization of digital media interventions in national HIV programme
 - Obscenity and information technology laws that may bar audio-visual depiction of sexual health aspects
 - Continued criminalization of queer people may make such interventions open to criminal abetment charges
 - Lack of implementation of progressive judicial verdicts on transgender rights (NALSA, 2014) or right to privacy (Puttuswamy, 2017)
- **Civil society groups must advocate for legal and policy reforms to ensure friendly environment for digital media interventions to be effective.**



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Contacts: Pawan Dhall: pawan.dhall@gmail.com; Jack Harrison-Quintana: jack@grindr.com; Dr. Rohit K. Dasgupta: R.Dasgupta@lboro.ac.uk