

An Exploratory Look into the Increasing Visibility of Queer-themed Content: Dhaka-based, Youth-dominated Social Media Platforms

By

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Economics and Social Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of BSS in Anthropology

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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The thesis titled “An Exploratory Look into the Increasing Visibility of Queer-themed Content: Dhaka-based, Youth-dominated Social Media Platforms” submitted by Mashaekh Hassan (19117001) of Summer, 2022 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of BSS in Anthropology on 11-10-2022.

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Ethics Statement

All the interviews were recorded with the interlocutors' permission. The interlocutors voluntarily participated in the conversation. For safety purposes, their names have been changed to pseudonyms.

Abstract

Given the taboo around sex and section 377, Bangladesh is not the safest country for the LGBTQIA population and its ally. The murder of Xulhaz Mannan, a queer activist, or the instances of ending up in jail for posting controversial content make it even clear that being vocal about supporting LGBTQ rights can have various detrimental consequences. Despite that, Bangladeshi virtual space is becoming heavy with queer-friendly content. Against this backdrop, the study explores the factors contributing to the increasing visibility of queer-themed content across Dhaka-based, youth-dominated social media platforms. I conducted both primary and secondary research to look deeper into the phenomenon. I reviewed academic journals, newspaper articles, and reports for secondary research and took participant interviews for primary research. The qualitative analysis of my findings from interviewing five interlocutors reveals that the people vocal about queer rights online belong to an affluent social class with access to English education and the language. Secondly, they feel more at ease being expressive online than offline. Thirdly, they are aware of the uncertainties surrounding whether or not a discourse related to LGBTQ rights would be efficient in the virtual sphere. Finally, they use English, customizable privacy settings on social media platforms, and lie if needed to narrow down the chances of getting backlashes.

Keywords: Bangladeshi LGBTQ Population, Queer, Social Media, Sex and Sexuality, Queer Visibility, LGBTQ Representation

Dedication

To all the faculties of Brac University who made my undergrad journey amazing

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List of Acronyms

NGO Non-governmental Organization

FGD Focus Group Discussions

Chapter 1

Introduction

Within Bangladesh's cis/hetero-normative context, identifying with an alternative gender identity and/or sexual orientation has never been easy. Being a vocal ally can result in deleterious repercussions too. Considering the prevalent homophobia, transphobia, and hateful remarks the LGBTQ community regularly encounters, remaining in the closet seems like the only safe option. The country is still unprepared to understand the concept of gender identification and accept any gender that does not fall under the binary system, minus some level of tolerance the Hijra community is blessed with. Unlike Hijras, other sexual and gender minorities cannot express their identities openly (Macdonald, 2021). Between the end of the Raj in 1947 and East Pakistan's independence from Pakistan in 1971, queer rights were not the focal points of any of the groups. Linguistic and cultural autonomy were the two quintessential Bengali nationalist struggles. Hence, no protest or liberation movement specifically for the queer population happened (Ahmed, 2019). Fast forward to 2013, hijras were granted to be considered the “third gender” by the government. The decision taken by the cabinet was the first step toward the legal recognition of the community (Titir, 2019). Even so, trans people are compelled to resort to begging or even the sex trade to earn their living. For most of their lives, they suffer from bullying, harassment in both public and private spaces; lack of employment, difficulty accessing healthcare, and in general, not being treated normally anywhere at all. Difficulties also arise because of not having their gender identity match the one listed on their legal documents such as passports, diplomas, birth certificates, which poses trepidation to get any job or travel. Whereas the cisgender individuals face no such hardship. They have been granted the ability to lead lives normally.

According to section 377¹ of the Bangladeshi Penal Code: *Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, women or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description that is, hard labor or simple for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.* In 2017, twenty-eight suspected homosexual men were detained from Keraniganj (Mahmud, 2017). The conversation remains incomplete without mentioning the story of Xulhaz Mannan, the founder of the first LGBTQIA-themed Bangladeshi magazine, Roopban. Queer activists Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy and Xulhaz Mannan were killed in 2016 by Islamist extremists due to their LGBTQ rights activism. Seeing the Bangladeshi government holding the activists responsible for their death, mentioning that their advocacy for unnatural sex is a criminal offense and is against the Bangladeshi culture, many LGBTQ activists went discreet. Many projects and activities took down their social media pages. A number of activists applied for asylum in the US, Sweden, Germany, and the Netherlands. Social media in Bangladesh is one of the heavily regulated and supervised spheres. After 2016, activists and community members have become increasingly critical of the politics of visibility and the harmful impacts it may have on one's life in Bangladesh's current political landscape. Authoritarian regime and its surveillance may drag its citizens to jail for a Facebook status and cartoon drawing that do not align with their ideologies (Khan, 2020).

Despite all that, somehow, Dhaka-based social media platforms are becoming heavier with queer-friendly content. This is clearly more noticeable as people are using social media spaces to show support for the LGBTQ rights through virtual content. The West-centric ideas of queer liberation and LGBTQ rights are becoming more common among people of this country, in which the localization of social media has played a huge role. I have seen a rise in the number of Dhaka-based upper/upper-middle class youth vocalizing their stances

¹ <http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/act-11/section-3233.html>

regarding LGBTQ rights, in spite of the possible dangerous outcomes of being outed, criticized, ostracized, and even jailed. In Bangladesh, social media accounts, although claimed to be autonomous adobes by many, are anything but safe platforms for "controversial" opinions.

Against this backdrop, I aim to explore broadly the factors contributing to the growing visibility of LGBTQ-friendly pieces of content across Dhaka-based youth-dominated social media platforms. Listed below are my specific research questions:

1. What is the demography of the social media users that are contributing to the growing visibility?
2. How do they identify themselves in the virtual sphere?
3. How do they express themselves in the virtual sphere and who are the audiences?
4. What are the kinds of safety measures they take to continue being expressive?

While my broad objective is to explore the contributing factors behind the increasing visibility of LGBTQ-themed content across social media platforms, my specific objectives are:

1. To analyse the social standing of the interlocutors
2. To explore the ways they describe their identity and how they perceive themselves as individuals in the online and offline sphere
3. To understand how they locate themselves within their virtual surrounding and how they make themselves heard amidst the crowd
4. Finally, to find out the realities that enable them to stay safe despite doing something as risky as being expressive about something as stigmatized

Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework

2.1 Mapping the field

Anthropologists worldwide have conducted many studies on the queer population or queerness understood within a cultural context as a whole. Intending to explore the aforementioned phenomena and frame the issues, I have used certain pieces of literature and theories. Connell's work, for instance, provides me with a better understanding of the interconnection between gender and sexuality. I have used Weston's work to study queerness using a lesser-used lens, kinship, and Stacey's to understand the diverse types of queer families, more specifically, gay families. I have used Karim's work to look into the experiences of sexually active Bangladeshi women across various sexualities. To get a decolonized picture of queer rights, I have used Ahmed and Shakhsari's work. To gain more contextually specific ideas regarding the advancement of LGBTQ rights in Bangladesh, I have looked at Chaney, Sabur & Sahoo's, and Khan's work. Lastly, MacDonald's work helped me understand the existing struggles of the Bangladeshi LGBTQIA community.

Within the patriarchal Bangladeshi context, heterosexuality is expected of both genders falling under the binary system. Hence, the summation of the notions of masculinity automatically creates an image of a heterosexual, husky-voiced, strong man. The problematic aspects regarding both the positivist and essentialist approaches is that the description of masculinity, as opposed to femininity, does not consider the context, resulting in a rigid understanding of masculinity (Connell, 2020). Both standpoints assign masculinity and femininity strictly to men and women, blurring the possibility of a biological female acting conventionally masculinely and other possible ways of doing gender differently from

societal expectations. Masculinity is not a universal concept. Within the context of gender relations, masculinity is a way of "doing" gender, and it can vary across the globe.

Admittedly, Connell's work helped me better understand how within the hetero-patriarchal Bangladeshi context, heterosexuality is imposed upon men. In my study, I aim to use the understanding to highlight how my interlocutors are essentially threatening the societal expectations surrounding gender by being vocal about queer rights.

Kath Weston talks about homosexuality as having various subjective meanings. Weston's work abstains from looking at the notions of homosexuality solely as sexual behavior. She uses kinship as a lens to put light on the kinds of negotiations the aspirants of alternative families have to make. She also talks about the experience of coming out, which, to a large American LGBTQ population, is a grand gesture of acknowledgement regarding how proud (or not ashamed) they are of their queer identity (Lewin, 1993).

Since my study broadly focuses on the increasing visibility of queer-friendly content, I wish to look into the cultural experience of coming out as an LGBTQ+ identifying person, presumably different from the American equivalent. Coming out publicly in the Bangladeshi context would increase the possibility of receiving hateful remarks and factor into extreme alienation and even imprisonment. Despite that, a lot of queer youth are using their social media space to show their queerness by posting memes about how frustrated they are with their sex life or pictures with their same-sex partners.

Portraying different kinds of queer families formed by gay men (Stacey, 2005) described different kinds of experiences regarding alternative marriage and romantic relationships, taking into account the notions of prevalent obstacles that homosexual people face; more precisely, the homosexual population that aspires to enter into the social contract of marriage. Conducted in Los Angeles, one of the most ethnically diverse metropolises, the

work is a compilation of and analysis of the case studies of four kinds of homosexual families. One, a monogamous couple; two, a couple of a hypersexual and not-so-driven-by-libido person; three, a trisexual throuple; and four, not a family but a proud black guy looking forward to settling down.

I have encountered several queer couples that wish to settle down (marry or move in together), a lot of which I have seen from the news feeds and stories on Facebook and Instagram. Unlike Los Angeles, Dhaka is not as diverse (ethnically) and not as tolerant even on the surface level toward the queer population. So, a never-ending struggle exists within the cultural sphere. Nevertheless, the said population pursues romantic relationships that might require them to put in extra effort, given the unsupportive structure.

In Bengali culture, unmarried offspring live with their parents. Commonly, the children will be surveilled by their parents. The daughters get the stricter version of the monitoring. Whether or not a woman is respectable enough is determined by her control of herself over her sexual desires. Criteria like when and to what extent she could be sexual, with whom, etc., are determined by the gendered views of space in middle-class households. (Karim, 2021). A sex-positive, single heterosexual, and non-heterosexual woman would face different struggles for acceptance. A freely sexual heterosexual woman of marriageable age would face social taboos for pursuing their sexual desires. Homosexual or bisexual women also struggle, but the obstacles do not stem from their sexually diverse identities. Instead, it comes from expressing themselves as sexual beings without fearing condemnation or punishment (Karim, 2021).

This is particularly relevant to my work because Karim's work is based on the Bangladeshi societal context and their focus on how the said women outed themselves despite living life under scrutiny. Moreover, the work can help recognize the nuances of

intersectionality by making people rethink the difference in the battles endured by heterosexual and non-heterosexual Bangladeshi women.

Sexuality is a taboo topic in Bangladesh. In schools, teachers usually skip the chapters addressing anything related to sex and reproduction. At best, the issues are discussed using the lenses of STDs and safety measures. Beyond school, sex and sexuality are subtly discussed, disguising it with the narratives of reproductive health rights or other non-taboo development jargon.

On the bright side, there are attempts from Bangladeshi activists and organizations to catalyze the representation of the queer population. Breaking into the patriarchal cultural space, Dhee² raises concerns regarding sexuality politics. In 2015, a queer poetry collection was published by Roopban. To provide medical care and other forms of support, Boys of Bangladesh started using social media platforms. Bandhu Welfare Society became a broadly pro-queer organization that assisted lesbians, bisexuals, trans, and Hijra individuals in Bangladesh. Around the same time, a survey was conducted on the discreet community of the country, providing them a voice.

According to (Khan, 2016), Dhee, a comic aiming to represent queer sexuality being navigated by a woman in a heteronormative Bengali space, by showing a Bangladeshi lesbian woman sharing her personal from her standpoint, is an important intervention in the patriarchal, heteronormative, Bengali cultural scene. Considering Dhee is composed in Bengali, reaching a broader audience in Bangladesh would be easier, unlike via the English content. Dhee also touches upon the Western experience of “coming out,” which is often portrayed as an essential milestone of one’s liberation. It is a crucial issue to be critical of,

²A flashcard comic strip portraying a Bangladeshi, lesbian narrative; published in September 2015

considering the hegemonic nature of the western queer movement, which heavily influences the equivalent movements happening in the rest of the world.

Outside Bangladesh, one such attempt to address queer rights issues happening to queer Iranian refugees. Addressing the mentioned issue, (Shakhsari, 2014) looked into the inconsistencies in the normalization of the Iranian queer and transgender refugee subjects, both temporally and spatially, through the discourses of refugee rights. Human rights being arbitrary, the overarching notion of the “violation of human rights” should be culturally specific. The paper was developed using the ethnographic data from the interviews with the Iranian queer refugee applicants in Turkey, the UNHCR, and various NGOs in Istanbul, Ankara, Denizli, Kayseri, and Nevsehir.

The work is relevant to my exploration because it provides a non-Western view of LGBTQ rights-related discourses. Western intervention in Bangladeshi queer discourses would blur out a lot of crucial cultural nuances. Considering the significance of analyzing queerness while considering the cultural context, the work broadly relates to my topic.

In Bangladeshi context, West-centric view of queerness, queer rights and violation are evident. (Ahmed, 2019) recognizes the significance of decolonization in both Bangladeshi and the South Asian context, provided that the goal is to ensure the progress of queer rights in the country. There are various Bengali sources that featured queer content. Works like *Those Days*, *Indira*, or the works of Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa are evidences of the region’s receptiveness toward the idea of same-sex intimacy (Ahmed, 2019). Highlighting colonizers’ contribution toward the suppression of queerness, he criticizes the neoliberal models of LGBTQ+ liberation, which are often displayed as neo-colonial projects. His primary focus is on the successes of the Hijra community. The community got its recognition by calling attention to the history of Bengali culture, highlighting the acceptance of queer activity as an integral part of the overarching cultural scenario. The scene for the LGBTQ+ activists is

filled with violent attacks. Several gay activists went abroad, seeking asylum. Many chose not to go to the United Kingdom, given the oppressive policies against LGBTQ+ refugees. It is vital to shield our minds from getting brainwashed with the Western perception of queerness and freedom.

The decolonization aspect aside, Islamic extremist targeting to silence the community is an observed reality, raising safety concerns. Factors like what can be said publicly and made public are crucial. Moreover, finding ways to continue producing knowledge about LGBTQ issues is significant. The concerns combined have resulted in the local rethinking of new forms of activist strategies. The strategies prioritize discreteness to visibility by focusing on self-preservation, re-connecting with community people, and reimagining the idea of activism. It should not be confused with putting an end to organizing events. It is more about being careful regarding the decisions, looking closely at the erasures, and how they are navigated (Khan, 2020).

Considering the deterioration of equality and human rights records in Bangladesh, (Chaney, Sabur and Sahoo, 2020) inspected the views of civil society organizations concerning the current conditions of the Bangladeshi LGBTQ+ population. Analyzing such organizations' attention to existing human rights violations and applying a critical frame to review their submission to the United Nations third cycle Universal Periodic Review (UPR), 2013-2018, they found out how prevailing violence, intimidation, and discrimination exert influence on the lives of the said population. In Bangladesh, oppression is a summation of extremism and political elites' refusal of equality regarding gender identity and sexual orientation. In a country like Bangladesh, the discursive processes offered by the UPR – despite not being a substitute for justiciable rights - play a massive role in ensuring progress of LGBT rights (Chaney, Sabur and Sahoo, 2020).

Analogous to the mentioned work's focus on the progression of LGBTQ rights in Bangladesh, I focus on the increasing visibility of pro-LGBTQ-themed content. The pieces of content in question are the ones that directly or indirectly show support for the LGBTQ community and its rights, and thus my study relates to the reviewed work.

Predictably, the LGBTQ+ population has to endure many struggles in this country. From institutional discrimination, bullying, alienation, and depression to physical and sexual violence – Bangladeshi LGBTI people face many challenges (Macdonald, 2021). LGBTI people prefer maintaining discreetness for their safety. Hence, conducting focus group studies and surveys is tough. Given the lack of funding and sensitivity of the topic, documenting the stories of the said population is challenging, despite the efforts coming from local activists, groups, and researchers (Macdonald, 2021).

It is noticeable that anthropologists worldwide have been interested in studying the lived realities of the queer population within a given socio-cultural context. The work of Connell talks about the strictly binary understandings of genders. Weston's work is fascinating because it highlights the importance of viewing homosexuality through a lens of kinship. Stacey's work on different kinds of queer families based in Los Angeles enables readers to look at a range of nuances.

Despite the undeniable merits of the papers, certain contextual nuances highlight the importance of conducting similar kinds of study, taking into account the Bangladeshi societal context. Especially because in a country like Bangladesh, where alternative sexual orientations are not understood by many, let alone recognized, studying the realities surrounding queerness, and the visibility of the queer population is admittedly tricky. Karim's work, for example, looks into how the prevailing patriarchy causes similar struggles for both heterosexual and non-heterosexual women because they are free sexual beings. Moreover, Bangladesh is not a safe country for the LGBTQ population, and neither is it for the activists,

not to mention the social stigma associated with sexually diverse identity tags. As argued by Chaney, Sabur and Sahu, despite the shortcomings of the civil society organizations, their report submissions to UPR are, in some way, contributing to the overall advancement of LGBTQ rights. There are projects like "Dhee" and organizations like "Mondro" that are working for the progress of the discourses surrounding queer rights. Admittedly, visible works are being done. Nevertheless, the news articles and the reports I reviewed more or less indicated that Bangladesh is not a safe place for the queer population.

Reviewing the existing literature, I found a few unexplored points and learned about some realities that motivated me to go forward with my research idea. The articles do not discuss how Dhaka-based, youth-dominated social media platforms are becoming increasingly heavy with queer-friendly content. Moreover, despite the probable destructive effects, how these social media users feel brave enough to use their personal virtual platforms to showcase their support was not touched upon either. As backed up by the report, not many enough academic works are produced centring on the queer Bangladeshi population. Unlike the queer community, "allies" is not a defined group. Speaking of contributing to the increasing online visibility of LGBTQ-related discourses, however, both entities could play the same role.

2.2 My intervention:

I identified the lack of research on the online visibility of queer-themed content within the Bangladeshi context contributed by the Dhaka-based youth as a research gap. To fill the research gap, I began my journey with a hypothesis: people need to have some privilege (or the lack thereof) to continue showing their support for LGBTQ rights. Moreover, since the government does not endorse LGBTQ movement, the roots of people's developing overall understanding of the community and its rights are worth tracing. The socio-political and

socio-cultural obstacles will likely challenge the queer population and the actively expressive allies. Within the context of a homophobic Bangladesh, I hypothesize people need to have some privilege (or the lack thereof) to continue showing their support for LGBTQ rights. Privilege is intersectional and depends on personal interpretations as much as generalized understandings define it. The socio-political and socio-cultural obstacles will likely face both the queer population and the actively expressive allies.

Using Bourdieu's concept of habitus, doxa, and capitals I aim to comprehend how the lives of the research populations differ from the majority: the national population. Consisting of various social groups and institutions, a society is a multidimensional space. There are various spaces or fields in/of which people can enter/be a part. The concept of habitus refers to people's understanding of the "way of being" within a given social context. Simply put, habitus is the second nature/filter system that is embodied by the social structure that may depend on religion, class, education, and one's journey of experiences. (Bourdieu, 1987). Doxa, the experiences that make such social rules commonsensical to people is another concept by him. When this habitus becomes apparent and considered a belief system, which can be articulated, is what we note as Bourdieu's understanding of Doxa (Bourdieu, 1985).

People have their own sets of bundles of resources or capital. Bourdieu divided the notions of capital into three categories (Bourdieu, 1987):

1. Economic Capital (money)
2. Social Capital (one's network)
3. Cultural Capital (intellect)

With a view that desires to look deeper into the privileges that have allowed the research population to be more vocal on social media platforms. Privilege is intersectional and depends on personal interpretations as much as generalized understandings define it. Before looking into the wider landscape of privilege, one must understand how this sense of

outspokenness is developed and given a platform based on individual capital. By using the theory, I aim to achieve my broad and specific objectives.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The broad objectives my study aims to explore are the motivating factors of increasing queer-friendly content visibility across urban upper/upper-middle class youth dominated social media platforms. More particularly, the study attempts to extract information regarding and explain the social standing of the interlocutors, their self-proclaimed traits of identity, their online presence and surroundings, and the factors that enable their bravery to flourish. The methodological tools I used to achieve my research objectives:

1. Secondary Research: Mapping the field
2. Primary Research: Participant interviews

Described in this chapter are the implemented methodological tools, followed by a delineation on how the analysis of data was navigated. The chapter ends with a recounting of the challenges I faced and a summary of the findings.

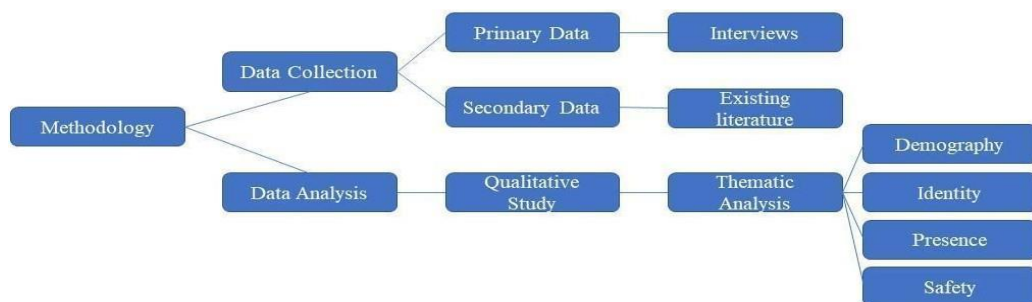


Figure 1 Methodological Framework

1. Secondary Research: Literature Review

The dissertation results from both primary and secondary research, accommodating a qualitative analysis of the former. To justify the importance of my primary data, backing it up with secondary resources is momentous. Hence, to better understand the field, I reviewed several existing academic pieces. From research articles to reports prepared by human rights organizations, I read through whatever relevant information I came across with a view to fine-tuning my fieldwork plans.

2. Primary Research: Participant Interviews

I interviewed four cis-gendered women and a non-binary AMAB, based in Dhaka, aged between 18 and 24. Considering the subject at hand, I reached out to the interlocutors via personal network as it seemed more appropriate than posting google form links on random online forums. I circulated the form link through my mutual friends to get attention from potential interlocutors. The form consisted of relevant and fundamental questions regarding their demographic information (age, gender, sexual orientation, level of education, major, residence, etc.) Later on, they were contacted for an in-person or online interview. The interviews were more like friendly conversations, guided by my questionnaire of a number of semi-structured and open-ended questions. The focus here was to bring out the interlocutors' life stories so that the analysis could be done based on their lived experiences and possessed views.

With the interviewees' consent, the online and offline interviews were recorded. For safety purposes, their names have been changed to pseudonyms. The duration of each interview ranges from 40 to 60 minutes. As per the necessity, I approached some of them for follow-up conversations conducted via Google Meet. Throughout the interviews, I tried my level best to let them open up the way they wanted, being careful about potential triggers.

Data Analysis:

I interviewed five urban Dhaka-based youth who are more or less vocal on social media platforms regarding LGBTQ rights. Prior to selecting the interlocutors, I scrolled through their Facebook and Instagram profiles. As I was virtually connected with all the interlocutors, I had some idea about the types of content they share on their platforms. I have engaged under some of their posts too. My idea of their being “outspoken” stemmed from how they engage in such discourses online: expressive and opinionated while being open to discussions. I reached out to them through mutual friends. Both mutual connection and having been connected virtually for a long time and not bombarding them with polar opposite opinions might have contributed to the quick rapport building.

Qualitative analysis helps us navigate the nuanced sources of people’s similar-sounding stories. It is difficult to measure qualitative data; however, it effectively assists researchers in exploring the queries concerning meanings, experiences, and viewpoints (Hammarberg, Kirkman and de Lacey, 2016). This is particularly helpful in going beyond the constructed framework and finding in-depth information on the subject or producing original ones (Cohen-Cole, 2014). Social science researchers engage fully in the examined phenomena, building trust and rapport with the research participants. As inevitable aftermath, finding themselves entangled by the contextual nuances becomes a familiar scene that could later help academicians pinpoint the camouflaged issues.

To conduct qualitative analysis, succeeding interviews, I transcribed the interviews. Two out of the five interlocutors responded in Bangla. I translated the Bangla transcriptions into English. Given that the interviews allowed me to listen to many of their stories, it was easier for me, to a large extent, to understand them better. My four themes focused on different aspects of the interlocutors while attempting to find a pattern, if there is any.

Considering that non-recurrent patterns could always give birth to novel research prompts, I was not exactly worried about having a hard time finding patterns from different life stories. Under the theme of demography, I compared the social standings of the interlocutors. As to the identity theme, my primary goal was to get rid of what I reflexively associated them with based on personal understandings and biases while, at the same time, diving deeper into their other human aspects. My preconceived notions regarding the interlocutors were solely based on their social media activities in the last few months. Regarding the presence theme, I questioned it from two angles: how do they view themselves as individuals in the virtual sphere, and how do they posit themselves within their virtual surroundings? Lastly, under the safety theme, I attempted to find out the possible sources of their bravery or what possible resources are enabling them to continue to be as brave.

Challenges:

Taking into account the safety aspect, I could not be as arbitrary as I wanted to in choosing interlocutors. I could not be as intersectional and inclusive as I wished in selecting my interlocutors. I reached them using my personal social media network. My Instagram and Facebook friend lists are curations of people I encountered at my university or met via group gatherings organized by my friends. Being a self-identified upper-middle-class university student studying at one of the most expensive private universities in Bangladesh, the people in my friend list whom I know through my university are predictably affluent. Besides, approaching strangers was not a feasible option considering the safety concerns. That, too, is one of the reasons behind the research population being my direct or indirect acquaintances. The interviewees I talked to belong to my networks, and I assumed them to be atypically brave for some privilege or lack thereof, using my social media accounts as a lens. Admittedly, this made the source of the data somewhat homogeneous.

Moreover, since I am an active user of Facebook and Instagram, I did not have the chance to check out other social media platforms as observantly. TikTok, for instance, is used by many for similar purposes - something I found post fieldwork.

Given the lack of resources, there are certain limitations in the dissertation. As this is an undergraduate dissertation, the number of research participants is small too. Due to the time constraint, proper participant observation was impossible. The analysis presented, therefore, is entirely based on my assumption and personal interpretations of the stories I was told during the interviews that took place between June and August 2022.

In chapter 4, 5, 6 and 7, I have thematically categorized and analyzed the findings from my interviews between June and August 2022. The interviews were conducted both online and offline. Three out of the five interviews required follow-ups, which were conducted online. The themes in focus were: demography, identity, presence, and safety. Based on the stories shared by my interlocutors, I made an effort to find the answers to my questions: what is their demography, how do they define their identity, how do they describe their online presence and behavior concerning others, and what makes them feel not unsafe enough to continue expressing their views.

Chapter 4

Social Standing of the Interlocutors

Bangladesh is a hetero-patriarchal society. Within the said context, there are very few people who are in support of LGBTQ rights. The number of people equipped with the vocabulary which enables them to articulate the notion of homophobia is a handful too. My interlocutors in this context are easily distinguishable, assuming that the support they show online is in harmony with their ideological standpoint. They are different in the sense that they are using their social media accounts to show support towards ideas that are essentially considered deviant of the norms. Inevitably, the Dhaka-based virtual spaces are showing more queer-friendly content.

This chapter attempts to dive deeper into the social standings of the interlocutors. Taking into account their religious views, gender, sexual orientation, class background, and educational background, the chapter tries to understand the interlocutors' habitus and the presumable connection to their existing capitals.

To look at the aspects of the visibility of queer-friendly pieces of content across social media platforms, I relied on two major sources: existing academic pieces and interviews. Through reviewing the existing literature, I tried to understand how the nuances regarding the LGBTQ community and rights within the global and national context are viewed within the academic realm. That, too, is a heterogeneous cluster. This dissertation used qualitative methods to analyze the semi-structured interviews. Through the interviews, I attempted to understand how the interlocutors' social standing, identity, preferred medium for expressing themselves, and personalized customization of their online surroundings for safety purposes correlate with their outspokenness within the virtual sphere.

Given my preferred research locale, my interlocutors are from metropolitan Dhaka. In total, I interviewed five people. Capable of affording English medium and mainstream education, all of them are regular students. With at least one stable breadwinner at home, three of the interlocutors had part-time/full-time jobs. Their affluence³ becomes even clearer by looking at the kind of educational institution they are enrolled in. In a sense, their educational institution and affordability are major indicators of their economic capital. The group of interlocutors is quite heterogeneous regarding their gender identity, sexual orientation, and religious beliefs. All of them are Bengalis⁴, ethnicity-wise.

Table 1 Summary of the Interlocutors' Demography

No	Pseudonyms	Age	Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation	Religious Views	Indicator(s) of Economic Capital		
					Self-identified Socio-economic Class	Educational Institution	Job
1	Zarin	23	Woman, Heterosexual	Questioning believer	Upper middle class	BUP ⁵	Yes
2	Sheela	22	Woman, Heterosexual	Islam	Upper middle class	NSU ⁶	Yes
3	Aloy	18	Non-binary AMAB ⁷ , Homosexual	Agnostic	Affluent middle class	Private A Levels	No
4	Jenny	23	Woman, Heterosexual	Agnostic	Affluent middle class	BracU ⁸	No
5	Maisha	21	Woman, Bisexual	Atheist	Affluent middle class	BUP	Yes

Perceivably the interlocutors' English proficiency and access to the English-language-based corner of the internet play a massive role in shaping how they express their stance

³ Regardless of their self-proclaimed class identity (middle class, upper-middle class etc.), they consider themselves affluent

⁴ Bangladeshi native Bengali speakers

⁵ Bangladesh University of Professionals

⁶ North South University

⁷ Abbreviation of Assigned Male at Birth

⁸ Brac University

regarding social issues. Three out of the five interviews were conducted in English, and the rest two in Bengali. They are capable of using jargon in informal conversations. Words like “feminism,” “homophobia,” and “intersectionality,” for instance, barely come up in regular conversations. The interviewees used such words to refer to and explain their ideas during the interview.

It is essential to highlight that many Bangladeshi guardians choose to enroll their children in English version schools, given the glorification of the English language in Bangladesh. Moreover, the tuition fees are significantly lesser than those in the reputed English medium schools. Hence, affording an English education has become a reality for a wider population. While educational institutions might play a role in providing them with a scope of immersing in the language to a certain extent, the acquisition of fluency and the quality of proficiency depend on variables: how good the instructors are, for instance. Moreover, many people learn English and Western ideas through content like movies, books, and TV series. The preferences surrounding such consumptions are the results of their habitus too. People make friends based on their shared taste in movies and series. Moreover, it is a familiar scene people tend to emphasize how similar they are to certain movie/series characters, depending on the slightest resemblance. Noticeably, they identify themselves using such references and use the English language to ensure clarity—the ability to articulate in such a manner results from their accumulated cultural capital.

Hence, it will be a gross generalization to conclude that their access to such vocabulary essentially results from the kind of education they are pursuing. It is vital to emphasize that using the normalization of such words in my interlocutors' regular vocabulary is not a direct result of the kind of education they are affording. Instead, it is more about choosing complex yet straightforward words to describe the ideas they are trying to articulate.

Interestingly, Jenny shared:

“People did not know much about homosexual couples before Western series got popular here. People saw gay couples and suddenly felt the necessity of representation. Lack of LGBTQ representation was always there. But the hype for seeing the sexually diverse people on screen increased when such Netflix shows became as easily accessible.”

Essentially, linguistic privilege is linked with cultural capital. That aside, they can also explain nuanced ideas regarding their position within society. Considering I got in touch with the interlocutors via personal networks and mutual friends, I did not have a hard time building rapport and the interviews, therefore, felt like friendly conversations. Despite the embarrassment of talking about someone’s familial income, they were more than comfortable calling themselves “middle-class” or “upper-middle class” based on their understanding of socio-economic classes. Two of my interlocutors identify as “upper-middle class”, the rest identify as “affluent middle class.” Calling oneself middle-class does not automatically translate to calling oneself poor. For, all interlocutors acknowledge the existence of some privileges that are only accessible to people that belong to similar habitus. Based on their affordability of certain goods, they consider themselves affluent. Their attempt to explain their social class might connect to their urge to better understand their position in society. Another probable explanation would be that they think it is mandatory to be self-reflexive to check their privilege.

As my interlocutor Zarin put –

“It’s annoying when people call themselves poor for no reason. They’re against capitalism and whatnot but complaint for being poor/middle classes; like what? People should really try to understand their privileges.”

While having enough wealth is a huge privilege and the most recurrently mentioned one, it is necessary to note that privileges have different forms and are intersectional. Plus, privileges are the confluence of various forms of capital.

Debunking the popular understanding of women in a permanently powerless position in a patriarchal Bangladeshi scenario, Jenny, a cis-gendered, heterosexual, Bangladeshi woman, shared:

"I think people hate gays more than lesbians. People would not care as much if they mistake me for a lesbian. Because you know, people have lesbian fetish. Some men I know fantasize about threesomes, but only with two women. Being a heterosexual woman has privilege here."

To put it in, people's social standing factorizes their behavior within a given societal context. Therefore, I tried to explore how their social standing might have contributed to their overall bravery in the virtual sphere. Now, the motivation might come from both privilege and lack thereof. For instance, someone might want to stand up for the LGBTQ community out of a moral obligation, while someone else might want the same because of questioning their sexuality. Religious orientation plays a massive role in shaping people's moral understanding of the world. Hence, it is equally important to understand how the interlocutors juxtapose their religious views and the extra-religious moral obligations. All in all, it was momentous for me to understand the demography of my interlocutors to fulfill my objective: exploring the potential factors behind their outspokenness.

In summary, all my interlocutors are enrolled in expensive educational institutions. Consisting of four cis-gendered women and one non-binary AMAB, the group of my interlocutors has one homosexual, two bisexual, and three heterosexual individuals. While all

come from Muslim families, three are non-believers, one is questioning, and the rest are believers. They all identify as upper-middle and affluent-middle-class individuals.

Chapter 5

Identity, Expression and Expressiveness

Identity is a complex concept to explain. How one identifies themselves may vary from how others describe them. As to someone's expression and expressiveness regarding their integral values or personality traits, these are actions one carries out within their habitus. Depending on their surroundings, people customize how they express themselves, making automatic calculations concerning what is appropriate and what is not within the given scenario.

This chapter attempts to better understand the interlocutors' virtual habitus by focusing on how they express themselves on their social media platforms. To draw a big picture of their improvised regulations, I tried pinpointing the factors that reinforce their identity within their habitus.

Being active users of social media platforms, all my interlocutors think they are more expressive of their identity in the online sphere. The degrees of their expressiveness, however, vary. Taking all that into account, this chapter goes deeper than simply locating the interlocutors within a societal context. It talks about the traits they think define their identity and how they can vary in different settings. The chapter explores how the interviewees express their identity in the online sphere and what kinds of audience the sphere comprises.

I received a diverse range of answers upon asking, "*How do you identify yourself?*". From friendly, confident, anxious, extrovert to curious, straightforward, Marxist-Feminist - the interlocutors used a range of words to define themselves. However, common ground among them is the consciousness regarding the prevalence of societal issues. Hence, they

think they have reasons to stand up for. Some explicitly phrased this aspect of their identity, while others mentioned it as a personality trait.

My interlocutor Jenny said,

“I am a feminist. Marxist too. Socialist, to be specific. And I already mentioned being an agnostic. I try to look at things from different perspectives. I don’t try to jump to conclusions too soon. I try to understand everything. When there’s someone else’s perspective, I try to be less biased.”

Aloy, another interlocutor, mentioned,

“My identity is my consciousness. In the sense that - my experiences that have shaped me. How I interact with people, how I share my views, my whole personality. Not entirely appropriate but I express my identity in many ways - it could be dying my hair, slapping someone, hugging someone at times. And my identity can be very impulsive.”

All interlocutors think their identity varies in different settings; another common ground. They express themselves differently depending on their surroundings. Predictably, their expression in the online sphere is much different from that in the real world. Regarding expressiveness concerning their stances and different views, they all think it is much easier to be vocal online.

Table 2 Social Media Platforms Used by the Interlocutors

Frequently Used Social Media Platforms	Number of Interlocutors Who have Accounts	Purposes	Used for Sharing Views Online
Instagram	5	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Posting pictures 2. Staying in touch with friends 3. Networking 4. Posting explicit⁹ content 	Yes
Facebook	5	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Staying in touch with friends 2. Networking 3. Sharing informative and wordy posts 4. Sharing memes 	Yes
Snapchat	3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Posting daily updates 2. Sex-chatting 	No
TikTok	1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Making short video clips and experimenting with video edits 	Yes
LinkedIn	4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Professional networking 2. Job hunting 3. Posting academic and co-curricular achievements 	No
Twitter	1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. For watching pornographic videos 	Unspecified

Quite instantaneously, it stood out to me that all the participants had the urge to express themselves. "Introvert" or "extrovert," no matter which label they feel comfortable identifying with, their interest in making themselves heard or seen is noticeable.

Aloy said,

“Being myself is the freedom to post something. Whatever I want.”

Sharing a similar sentiment, Maisha said,

⁹ Could be semi-nude pictures, pictures with romantic partners, memes on sexual topics, etc.

“I do whatever I want on TikTok. On TikTok I am like what I am in real life. I can be mindless there.”

Regarding having access to the English language, I think it is a mentionable factor behind their being expressive across social media platforms. Bangla is Bangladesh's lingua-franca, so working-level English proficiency is not normative. Hence, the English language works like a shield when it comes to expressing certain identity traits that are deviant from the norms. The confluence of capital can be translated into relative security.

Given that the interlocutors have a somewhat clear idea regarding who are on their friend list, they know who the audiences to their identity expressions are. This can be linked with having similar capital accumulation considering their friend lists are mostly representative of the institutions (schools, offices, etc.) they are parts of. Creation of a similar habitus, in such cases, is inevitable.

The aspect of similar habitus aside, due to the comfort factors attainable while using social media, many find it easy to open up more boldly online. This happens regardless of how close the interlocutors are in real life to their virtual connections.

According to Sheela, one of my interlocutors,

“I think I’m more sarcastic on social media. I am an introvert or ambivert; whatever you wanna call it. But I think I’m more funny on social media, while upfront [face-to-face] I don’t talk much. When a conversation happens on social media, I get the time to type what to say...I get the time, you know, so in social media, I think before I speak. When I’m offline, I don’t. So here are the differences.”

Zarin, another interlocutor, has her Facebook filled with atheist, sexual, and various other kinds of unacceptable memes, posted in the public privacy mostly. However, when it comes to posting pictures of herself with her male friends, she has to be calculative. She said,

“If you think my Facebook is bad, my Instagram is worse.” ... “I haven’t kept a lot of my friends for the particular reason. They are friends but they are judgmental. People I know... I know that wouldn’t judge me if I...revealing post anything, you know, sexy. Or post picture with males. You know, I come from a very conservative family. If I post things against my family values, you know, “those friends” would leak my posts and private stuff to my family. Not even in like privacy I post those on Instagram. I do not keep those friends.”

Having said that, my peroration is that the relative lack of peer pressure online helps them be more expressive than they are in real life. The overall interpersonal dynamics are hugely different in the virtual sphere than in real life. Besides, this also highlights the kind of people the interlocutors are surrounded by – an indicator of their social capital.

As it stood out to me, it is easier to keep expressing oneself online because no active debater is standing in front of someone, constantly making eye-contacts or other gestures that might instantaneously trigger self-consciousness. Unlike face-to-face conversations, one can keep expressing their views without getting interrupted by a different viewpoint, putting aside the aspect of subjective rationality.

Language, too, is a considerable role player here. As I mentioned earlier, access to the English language helps. The ability to use the language appropriately in the virtual sphere, meaning being able to type and articulate, is one of the beneficial aspects. Using social media platforms helps one express identity in a polished manner. Besides, they can edit their posts, make necessary grammatical modifications, and, most importantly, even delete those if needed. Both their economic and cultural capital contribute to these abilities. In short, they can construct their virtual personality and the overarching presence in ways they want

to. Practically, the safe online space is ensured by their social capital which essentially factorizes the emergence of similar habitus.

I dive deeper into the said aspects under the chapter where I talk about the safety theme, explaining how these factorize the increasing visibility of queer-friendly content.

Chapter 6

Presence and Surroundings

Facebook and Instagram are vast realms of content. The broad term "social media user" does not create an instant image of the diversity of people accommodated here. From influential political figures to day laborers - social media platforms are worlds within the world. Some users are noticed by many, while some are invisible.

That being said, the chapter studies the intersectional positioning of the interlocutors. In other words, how they see themselves as inhabitants of the said realms. In this section, I talk about the interlocutors' incentives behind sharing particular posts, what they think about social media as a medium for social issues, and how they view such platforms specifically for LGBTQ rights-related discourses.

Social media platforms being densely populated and the population being under the same network, people can engage with others in discourses. About the efficiency of such platforms, I think it is more about the people than the medium itself. Mainly because, no matter how easily and quickly the pieces of content reach people, it is ultimately on the people whether or not they will be receptive to new views. In other words, it is the users that can let a medium be effective; a medium is only a medium without its users.

My interlocutors have mixed opinions regarding social media as a platform for conducting discourses. As recurrently implied by Sheela and Zarin, the inefficiency is caused by the online behavior of the general Bangladeshi social media users. The common reasons that made them possess a somewhat pessimistic view about social media platforms' efficiency are the prevalent patriarchy and heteronormativity in Bangladesh.

Sheela mentioned,

“As it's our country...it's Bangladesh...both offline and online...this issue is more sensitive. So people don't usually talk about it. And yeah, social media could be a better platform to express it, but...I don't think that's the thing. I don't think that works.”

Zarin recollected,

I know the same person had alcohol last night, and that's not haram. But supporting LGBTQ makes you anti-God. So the hypocrisy is there. If you call out that person for that, there would be other people to support them. People like us that support LGBTQ people, we usually don't say it in public. Or people that are LGBTQ, they usually don't say it in public, cause Bangladesh. The one term is Bangladesh.”

In another observation, which is not as black and white, opined by the interlocutors, the quality of discourses taking place in social media platforms could vary. In their words, such platforms could be good mediums for discourses, but there are a lot of external variables to consider. The responses, therefore, are not limited to yes and no. Unlike Sheela and Zarin, Jenny, Maisha and Aloy are, to certain degrees, optimistic about the efficiency of such platforms, despite the factors like heteronormativity and patriarchy prevailing in Bangladesh. Aloy thinks social media discourses can be elaborative through texts on Facebook and Instagram. Zarin, on the other hand, thinks it is easier on Instagram, although discourses can happen in her private account or personal inbox. Both Jenny and Maisha believe that people might think about things differently after reading a seemingly controversial post.

Jenny shared,

“I think proper discourse is possible to a certain extent.” ... “I think we get exposed to such discourses via watching Western TV series, we can know about a lot of things from there. It is possible to have LGBTQ discourse on Facebook. However, if someone comes out as an LGBTQ person or publishes a statement on Facebook, they will receive a lot of threats. There are both scary sides and positive sides. Then again, I don’t see any medium that can spread words as quickly as Facebook. It’s much easier than visiting houses and delivering posters.”

Maisha is confused about whether or not these platforms can actually spread the words. However, as someone who learned about her rights through Facebook content, she has a different standpoint regarding the efficiency aspect. She said,

“I don’t think so social media can be a good starting point. Actually, I haven’t thought about this. I think it depends on the target audience. TransEnd¹⁰, for example, targets the people who are well educated and into learning such things. But as far as the root level population is concerned, I don’t think Facebook would be a feasible medium.”

While talking about her personal journey, however, she has a different kind of story to share-

“Personally, Facebook has helped me a lot to understand. I learned about my rights, about the injustices happening in the society through Facebook. I think a lot of people have been helped by the medium. But two things happen, when discourses take place. One, people get influenced. Two, they become intolerant. So, there’s a problem. But if anyone wants to engage into a discussion for the sake of it, I think it can be a good platform.”

¹⁰ A non-profit organization working for the rights of the Bangladeshi gender diverse population

Referring to all the interlocutors' words, the responses are similar to the questions about the scene of LGBTQ-rights-related discourses on social media platforms: it depends on the people to whom they deliver their messages and the fact that it is not as binary. Even after the uncertainty surrounding whether people will experience a paradigm shift by simply coming across online content, the interlocutors continue sharing. Speaking of the incentive behind sharing informative posts regarding socio-political issues, the interlocutors think that people might or might not learn about new perspectives. Noticeably, the motivating factors are ambiguous. Nonetheless, four interlocutors freely share such pieces of content on both Facebook and Instagram, and the rest on Instagram only.

Taking into account the angle of how the interlocutors view themselves and their existence as expressive, social media using individuals, I observed that the interlocutors have strong opinions that they know to be unconventional. The observation became even more apparent when they talked about how they feel while sharing such loud content and how well aware they are of how people around them might view their stance.

In terms of how they posit their social-media-user-self amidst their virtual surroundings, the interlocutors' idea regarding the kind of people they are surrounded by gives them assurance that there are people who will oppose them, and at the same time, there are people who will support them. Their way of expressing themselves and their stances through sharing content can have various implications depending on the type of it. Here, being seen as a queer individual versus an ally depends on what the content displays.

Table 3 Types of Content Shared on the Social Media Platforms

Types of content	Possible topics
Memes	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Funny memes for casual and dark humor2. Anti-religious and anti-government content
Pictures and Videos	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Personal pictures (trips, cute couple pictures etc.)2. Pictures with slogans3. Infographics
Written Posts	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Creative write-ups, casual one-liners2. Informative posts about socio-political issues

No matter how personal their online activities are, they can broadly pinpoint how their dwelling is glanced upon by the users they are surrounded by. Not every kind of content is equally unsafe or has the potential of showing someone as a brave and controversial human being. If someone shares a funny meme on a gay couple, for instance, it would not automatically make someone perceive that the person is gay or in support of homosexuality. A viewer could interpret it in many ways, and the humor aspect is the savior here. But a lengthy post about supporting LGBTQ movements actively displays someone's stance regarding the issue. However, here, too, an audience might perceive one of the two possibilities – one, the person is an ally, and two, the person belongs to the LGBTQ community. The potential threat risk would vary based on how the person is perceived. A picture with someone's partner making it evident that they are in a romantic relationship, through the pose or the caption, is the most open one can be about their sexuality. Arguably, this is the kind of content that could bring the most dangerous threats. They make careful choices, depending on how loud the content is, before posting particular kinds of queer-friendly content, accommodating the queer-friendly content in the virtual space.

To conclude, sharing content on social media platforms is the only means to show one's presence in the virtual public realm; the research participants are into sharing different types of posts. Moreover, they never shy away from sharing well-articulated content about

various socio-political issues. I found that the habit of sharing memes is common among all.

From mental health issues to anti-patriarchal discourses in disguise of intellectually stimulating jokes, the topics of the memes vary widely.

Chapter 7

Safeguarding the Atypical Bravery

People scared of hanging pride flags on their balconies are using rainbow filters to show support. Something about this bravery is so atypical that the Facebook and Instagram timelines feel like a different country altogether, although bound within the Bangladeshi territory. This chapter investigates the curative nature of the habitus within which their bravery flourishes and the capitals that play undeniable roles in the curation.

For a prelude, my interlocutors told me about incidents where people confronted them for posting controversial content. They have been personally messaged on social media accounts too. Three of my interlocutors think these are cybercrimes, while the rest two think it is nothing more than an unpleasant experience. None of the interlocutors think the police would be a reliable source of protection, considering the political stances of the interlocutors and the regulating body of the Bangladeshi police are literal opposites.

Plausible deniability, as a safety measure, works well for them. Along with deleting posts upon sensing possible danger, they can also blame it on the hackers or fake screenshot creators, if need be. In response to what she would do if her explicit posts somehow reach to her parents, Zarin answered,

“Deny deny deny. I'll counter-gaslight them saying "this is wrong. This is edited. I'd never do something like that." There's no way you can make me admit to that. Look, I know the consequences. They would seize the phone, they would take away the minimal freedom they gave me, they will hold it over me for the rest of my life and make me do things I don't want to do. [...] So I use a lot of safety procedures. I do not post too explicit pictures. I would never post that. If they get caught, I'd show, "No.

It's just girls." [...] "Too explicit pictures...I did upload it. If it gets caught, I'd say "Mom, it's hacked." There's no way I'm admitting to that. I'm sorry. As bad as it sounds, I've learned two things from my parents: manipulation and gaslighting."

Regarding customization of the virtual surrounding, it is about compartmentalizing the safe and unsafe corner of their social media house. It seems to instill in their minds an idea of a safe space where they can open up and be expressive about their stances. All the interlocutors have a somewhat filtered friend list. In other words, they think before adding someone to their friend list. They often have to connect with people for professional or academic purposes virtually. In general, those connections are easy to ignore. Against this backdrop, there are many variables to consider, but in short, a summary could be drawn highlighting the usage of the “close friends” feature on Instagram and the “custom” feature on Facebook.

As Aloy said,

“No. My Facebook account is locked. Instagram is private at times. It honestly depends on my mood. If there’s too many follow requests, I private it. Because... Suspicion. Instagram is pretty fluid.”

Zarin and Sheela responded similarly when asked what kind of content they have on their close-friends list. They both post different types of content using different privacy settings. As the name suggests, the close-friends list comprises the people closer to them or they can trust with revealing their closeted selves. Moreover, the features let one add and remove people at the user's convenience. In the literal sense, the custom list is customizable in that way and hence, can be made safer.

In other cases where the user does not have a custom list, they are comfortable with that because they do not have any family members in their friend list. Jenny, for example, mentioned –

“I don’t have a custom list. I don’t need it because I don’t have any family members there. Other than my sister and close cousins, I don’t add any relatives on my Facebook.”

Maisha, too, is one with no customized friend list. Her reasons, however, are different from Jenny’s. She does not care much about the repercussions: *“I share stuff if I want to. If something controversial happens, it’ll happen”*

Regarding the aspect of the English language being a protective shield, when they are writing a long informative post, people with limited knowledge of English would not be able to comprehend, let alone debate. Then again, some people are proficient in English and have a polar opposite stance regarding the issues my interlocutors stand up for. In the case of posts written in Bengali, however, there is a broader chance of getting backlashes. While not all the interlocutors use English that frequently to post content regularly, they still recognize how good a shield the language can be.

Clearly, the surroundings of the Bangladeshis in question are not surrounded by the whole nation-state. In the sense that they do not have to deal with the entire population on any basis. Their surroundings are essentially their habitus, factorized by the confluence of their social and cultural capital. Habitus is curative, and certain kinds of habitus can be a privilege enabling them to show support toward views against the existing structure. One can only encounter breaking a structure when one defies it; conforming would not do that. The safety net that protects one from harmful consequences despite standing against the system

emerges from their habitus. The emergence of the habitus is not accidental. Rather it is factored by individuals' capitals.

That being said, a group of like-minded friends forms on the basis of similar habitus. Not to mention the significance of ideological similarity. To put forward the role of having a supportive group of friends, indeed a crucial factor, three of my interlocutors had certain stories to tell. Aloy recalled an event where they received help from their fellow community members, Jenny talked about how comparatively safer she feels than the civilians for being an active part of a student-led political group.

Aloy reminisced,

No. Not really. Because most of the fights I've had were with people I know. No, i've never really felt threatened or so. There was this guy that used to flirt with me. I obviously dumped him. He'd reach out to me, call me in the middle of nights. He took screenshots of my posts and posted on a Muslim community facebook group. Thanks to a queer-right organization, the post got taken down. I felt vulnerable, but never threatened. I knew nothing would happen to me.

Jenny stated,

"Honestly speaking, being an active part of Chhatro Union¹¹ really helps. We can get away quite easily if there's a case against us. I know for sure I am in a much safer position than a regular civilian.

Nevertheless, Sometimes, simply having friends with similar views does not help. For, some of them are scared and not vocal enough about their stances. Zarin reminisced,

¹¹ One of the leading student organizations in Bangladesh

“[It’s frustrating] how low number of people will be on your side. Specifically on LGBTQ. This particular post that I spoke about in my last answer, there were like one or two people who were on my side. And I’m talking about nine to ten people [who were] against me, you know, giving jabs after jabs after jabs.”

One of my leading research questions is regarding how the interlocutors ensure their safety while doing something unsafe, like showing visible support toward the LGBTQ community. In summary, there is a myriad of variables to consider: the content in question, who caught it, to what extent the person would go to make one suffer for displaying the support.

Predictably, the consequences might vary depending on who is causing the safety concern. The actor driving the threat to safety is a list of a wide range of options. For example, one might feel threatened by a university senior for engaging in a comment war. Such incidents can lead to bullying or being ostracized by certain groups, harming the social life within a given sphere. Another example is that one might get caught by their parents for sharing a picture that is loud enough to portray them as a non-heterosexual being. Being caught by police would factorize different aftermaths.

Consciously, as it stood out to me, they choose what to post where and under what kind of privacy category. While it seems like an attempt to reduce the chances of getting attacked virtually or in real life, the abrupt incidences of engaging in online fights confirm that sometimes they choose not to share something within their trusted circle despite the probable unpleasant consequences.

Table 4 Possible Connection between the Genre of Content and Privacy Option

Topic of Content	Privacy: Public	Privacy: Friends	Privacy: Custom list
Memes about alternative sexuality and gender identity in general	Mostly yes	Yes	Yes
Memes that are humorous yet would imply them being queer	No	Mostly no; depends on the friend list	Yes
Informative posts in support of LGBTQ rights	Mostly yes	Mostly yes	Yes
Funny one-liners against homophobia	Maybe	Mostly yes	Yes
Couple pictures that give clear indication of their sexuality	No	Mostly no; depends on the friend list	Yes

Besides, the viewers' perceptions might sometimes be based on what someone wrote as a caption in their shared post. Simply coming across someone's pro-LGBTQ post would not automatically translate as showing in someone's head unless the audience knows the person to a certain extent, considering many people share such posts ironically to curate haha reactions. I have encountered comments like "are you in support of it?" under such posts, showing an urge to get a confirmation.

It is crucial to understand whether or not they consciously felt unsafe or what feeling unsafe meant to them. Safety is both abstract and variable in cases like this. There are various possibilities as to what might make one feel unsafe. Feeling unsafe is a different experience from being aware of possible detrimental consequences. Similarly, the feeling of safety, too, varies. It does not always have to be legal support. Support from friends, the moral obligation to stand up for the right causes, network, all combined or separately, push or leave them alone to continue posting on the virtual sphere.

In summary, as it stands out to me, it is not the literal assurance of safety that motivates them to continue with their contribution to the visibility of queer-friendly content, but rather the moral obligations they subscribe to and a supportive network within which they find themselves belong. To put forward the safety measures, there are three main reasons – 1. Plausible deniability (blaming it on photoshop or a hacker), 2. Customizable privacy system, and 3. Access to the English language. The third one is not entirely a safety measure but is a comparatively safer shield to cover oneself with because controversial posts written in Bangla might result in a wider chance of getting backlashes. Speaking of the motivating factors, they have specific hopes to cling to that seem to lessen the fear: 1. A supportive group of friends, and as I have interpreted, 2. Their moral obligation.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

It was somewhere in 2015. At the onset of July, millions worldwide used the rainbow filter on Facebook, enthusiastically supporting homosexual marriage (Wecker, 2015). I used to be a ninth grader back then. Having studied in eight schools in eight districts of the country, I have had the luck to curate many acquaintances, mostly my age, on my Facebook. In my then-Facebook world, however, only one person joined the gang and actively displayed their support. I wanted to jump on the bandwagon too, but I could not. Quickly enough, I got okay enough reasons to thank myself for instantly suppressing my urge to show solidarity. For a crime like showing support to the cause, the only supporter in my network received hate comments, encountered bullying, and got unsolicited messages from strangers. Eventually, they had to take the picture down and deactivate their profile for a few days. I could not afford the same. As someone with an unbearable history of being bullied for being unmasculine, showing support for a cause like this would only add fuel to the flame I was trapped inside.

Many things have changed since 2015: the world, the country, my surroundings, a lot of things, indeed. From fearing the filter or even liking a pro-LGBTQ post to reaching a point where witnessing such pieces of content became routine, the journey has been great. Alternatively, that is how it looks on the surface.

Conducted among urban affluent middle-class youths with access to mainstream English education, aged between 18-24, the dissertation reveals that their way of expressing themselves varies depending on the context. They are strictly against homophobia, and they show it online. In fact, with more outspokenness. Their online presence happens through their

sharing of online content that they think might or might not contribute to the initiation or progression of a discourse. Last but not least, their access to social, economic, and cultural capital like the English language and a supportive friend circle coupled with a customizable privacy system of social media platforms make their habitus a safe space for them to continue being this brave.

This dissertation aimed to look deeper into the surface; explore the reasons behind the sudden change in showing support on social media platforms for LGBTQ rights. Some obvious drawbacks of the research lie in the lack of time and resources. Given the small number of research participants, the data set is far from representative of the overall population contributing to content visibility. Moreover, the interlocutors belong to my network, so the origin of the stories could be greater diverse provided it had a wider sample size. As the themes have been explored based on findings from one or two rounds of interviews, the analyses have been shaped by personal assumptions. There were various nuances I could not explore, a number of questions that were not asked and hence, not answered.

Despite the research limitations, I was able to fulfil my research objectives, at least partially. My data is broadly based on the information I attempted to gather. The acquired information can be a good starting point, I believe, in the future for finding answers to the issues in question.

As an afterthought, the reasons why people are suddenly becoming so outspoken about LGBTQ rights in an unsafe country like Bangladesh are nuanced. Quite understandably so. The reason can be rooted in generational change or cultural agency. Concepts like these are so intertwined that the compartmentalization of those is inconceivable. Given the laws and stigma, it is worth exploring how the vocal supporters imagine their fallback. What are

the stories behind the interlocutors' becoming LGBTQ rights supporters, considering that the abbreviation is yet to be a buzzword within the socio-political realm? How supportive are the family members of their stances? Taking into account that being an ally, too, is stigmatized, are the active allies likely to become a new minority? What would happen within the national scenario as a broader consequence of the increasing LGBTQ-themed content visibility online? I invite research enthusiasts to set on a journey to explore answers to the new questions that have emerged from the answers to the old questions.

Further research:

1. How the LGBTQ population and its ally are using the virtual spaces despite the possible detrimental consequences
2. Overall lack of research on the LGBTQ population due to the prevalent stigma and safety concerns
 - 2.1 Conducting rigorous research is hard because of legal issues
 - 2.2 Many people are in the closet, so it is even harder to reach people
3. Whether or not the vocal allies are equally unsafe due to the stigmas and section 377
4. The possible sources of people's in-depth understanding regarding the alternative identities

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

Theme: Demographic information

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Sexual Orientation
4. Religion (by born)
5. Religious views
6. Ethnicity
7. Parents' income
8. Educational institution(s)
9. Major
10. Job/ any sort of income source

Theme: Identity

11. How do you identify yourself?
12. Does this vary in different settings?
13. Is it different in the online atmosphere? If so, how?
14. What social media platforms do you use?
15. For what purposes?
16. Which platform/s do you think best represent/s your identity? And why?
17. How do you be yourself in the online sphere?
18. Who is the audience of your identity/expression?

Theme: Presence

19. How do you express yourself/your identity on social media?
20. What kinds of content do you share/post there?
21. What makes you want to share a particular post?
22. What do you think before sharing a piece of content?
23. How do your virtual connections react to those?
24. In general, do you use your platform to share your views?
25. Have you ever had discourses with your connections?
26. Do you think it is an excellent medium to have discourses? Why or why not?

27. Is it the same in the case of LGBTQ-rights-related discourses? Why or why not?
28. Have any virtual connections ever opposed your opinion under the comment section?
29. What kinds of opinions?
30. What are you likely to do after seeing polar opposite opinions?
31. Would you rather ignore or initiate a discussion on explaining your stance?
32. Has the difference in opinion ever led to heated-up arguments/ comment war?

Theme: Safety

33. How do you feel after such engagements?
34. Have you ever felt unsafe by such incidents? Why and why not?
35. What did you do upon feeling unsafe/threatened?
36. Has such an issue ever reached the level of cybercrime?
37. If yes, what steps did you take?
38. Are all of your posts public?
39. What makes you post some content on the public list and the others on the custom?
40. What types of content do you post on your customized privacy list?
41. How often do you share your opinions and/or views on such platforms?
42. Have you ever felt scared thinking about posting something publicly?
43. If yes, which kinds of posts and why?
44. Who is on your custom list?
45. Are you close to them in real life too?
46. If not, what do you take into consideration before adding someone to the list?
47. Would you consider them more like-minded than others? Why or why not?

