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BEYOND THE SWIPE: UNPACKING INDIAN WOMEN'S SAFETY STRATEGIES ON BUMBLE

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Bumble presents itself as a feminist app providing a 'safe space' while grounding this claim in narratives of technological solutions to address women's safety concerns (Arkenbout et al., 2021; Bivens & Hoque, 2018; Pruchniewska, 2020; Young & Roberts, 2021). It advertises that the platform gives women more agency in managing their safety in dating interactions (Barrie, 2021). However, women on Bumble have reported harassment and abuse on Bumble despite its safety by design claims (Singh & Sirur, 2018). This study aims to understand the experiences of Indian women with the safety features of Bumble to critically assess the effectiveness of the app's safety design in their daily lives.

Background

India is the fifth fastest-growing dating app market globally, and it is projected to become the second-largest revenue-grossing country for dating apps by 2027 (Gupta, 2023). Despite the persistence of patriarchal forms of marital arrangements and the complexities of restrictions surrounding caste, class, and religion, the proliferation of dating apps has led to some degree of normalisation of digital dating culture in urban India (George et al., 2021).

The normalisation of dating apps in the Indian marketplace came with its limitations, one being the skewed ratio of women to men. According to the data collected by Statista in 2020, 67 per cent of users on dating platforms were men (Mehrotra, 2021). Women only constituted 29 per cent of the total dating pool (Siddiqi, 2021). This skewed gender ratio is a contributing factor in understanding women's experience on dating apps, with women reporting being bombarded with messages from men that consequently make them feel intimidated and harassed (Singh & Sirur, 2018; Wells & Bellman, 2018). One company has tried to address this issue by embedding safety into its platform's design, communicating that Bumble is a safe place for Indian women (Wells & Bellman, 2018).

Bumble's Marketing

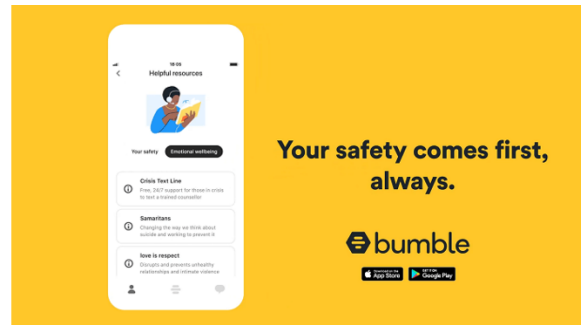
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Source: Bumble Private Detector safety feature: Here's what it offers (Times of India, 2022)



Source: Bumble Safety And Wellbeing Center | What It Is & How To Use It 2022 (Dudehack, 2022)



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Bumble uses taglines such as “it is more than an app, it’s a movement” (Young & Roberts, 2021, p.1). To promote its safety discourse, Bumble has run campaigns such as, ‘Equal Not Loose’, ‘#MakeRomanceEqual’, and ‘Stand for Safety’ to depict the app as finding design solutions for safety issues. Bumble’s ‘women first’ approach and its branding efforts have created a perception of it being safer than its rivals *Tinder* and *Hinge* for female users (Young & Roberts, 2021). The ‘women first’ design is a feature unique to Bumble, unlike other dating apps where men are known to make the ‘first move’ (MacLeod & McArthur, 2019). The ‘women first’ feature is described as stopping the initial bombardment of messages from men while giving women added time to scrutinise men’s profiles before deciding to initiate conversation (Pruchniewska, 2020).

The phenomenon of dissuading men from sending ‘dick pics’ on Bumble is also part of its ‘safety by design’ narrative. Bumble uses an artificial intelligence (AI) technology called a ‘private detector’, which detects and blurs out sexually explicit pictures before the recipients receive them (Barrie, 2021). It advertises this feature as part of its larger narrative of safe experiences for women. However, the *Shardha Walker*¹ murder case has brought Bumble to the forefront of the conversation surrounding women’s safety as Shardha had met her murderer Aaftab, on Bumble (Grover, 2022; Khan, 2022). This has sparked a larger discussion about Indian women’s experience of harassment and abuse on dating apps, especially on platforms that advertise themselves as safe.

Methodology and Initial Findings

¹ Shardha Walker was murdered by Aaftab Poonawala who she had met on Bumble (See more Khan, 2022). Due to this murder case concern surrounding Indian women’s use of dating app became a popular topic of discussion on mainstream media.

An explorative qualitative approach is employed in this study to understand Indian women's lived experiences and meaning-making process with Bumble. This approach allows researchers to “discover realities based on participants' narratives of their lived experiences, viewpoints, and beliefs” (Safadi & Swigart, 2017, p. 9). The qualitative design of this study aims to document Indian women's experience with Bumble's safety features and their attitudes towards the app's safety standards. It will highlight the significance women attribute to these features as part of their online dating safety practices. By placing women's lived experiences at the centre of the meaning-making process, this approach legitimises and amplifies their voices as a valuable source of knowledge for this research (Westmarland & Bows, 2018).

To conduct this study, we conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews on Zoom. The study recruited 23 women users of Bumble, aged 18-35, which represents the largest user base of Bumble. According to Sola (2017), 72% of Bumble users are under 35.

Traditionally, it has been the role of the elders in the family to find a suitable partner for the woman to marry, and online dating carries a stigma for women who are at risk of drawing severe reproach from their family (Bhandari, 2020; Devi & Parihar, 2021; Kapila, 2011). Despite the stigma, initial observations found that Bumble has successfully branded itself as a 'safe' platform for Indian women by advertising its built-in safety principles. Nonetheless, one of its India-specific features where women have the option to use the first initial in their profile instead of their full name has been labelled as irrelevant by the participants. “Name is the first thing people exchange when meeting someone new. I have no idea what kind of interaction Bumble imagined will take place with people just using their initials” (Amy, 2023). This feature was introduced to safeguard women from being easily identified and reported to their family or being harassed.

Preliminary findings have identified that Bumble has not been successful in finding technological solutions for social problem. As a platform Bumble is associated with a toxic culture of use based in misogynistic and patriarchal values. Women on the app have experienced harassment, especially in the form of abusive messages, image-based abuse, online stalking, being catfished, and physical and sexual violence from men they meet through the platform. This has led to women leaving the platform due to major mental health distress and out of fear for personal safety. It has also been revealed that the reporting mechanism has been flawed, with women pointing out that the profiles of users whom they had blocked due to harassment continue to appear on their feeds despite them having reported and blocked those individuals.

Next Steps

The initial findings suggest that Bumble's design features and marketing narrative have played a crucial role in attracting more women to the platform. However, it is important to note that these factors have not actually improved women's safety experience on the platform. This raises questions about the representation of Bumble within the context of neoliberalism and globalization. Bumble has had to navigate resistance and opposition from more traditional social economies that involve arranged marriages the involves families and their kinship networks in matchmaking and its safety measures. As a result,

women in India have become more vulnerable in their dating lives with multinational companies prioritising profit margins over their safety concerns.

This study is ongoing and aims to contribute to broader debates surrounding online safety on dating apps by examining the mechanisms employed by Bumble to foster trust and exploring how women navigate these mechanisms. The findings from this study could initiate discussions on the unique features of Bumble and other dating platforms in India, especially when compared to those in other regions of the global South/North.

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