

Niyam Nritya: a dance of resisting and recreating social norms within Queer South Asian

bodies!

by

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Niyam Nritya: a dance of resisting and recreating social norms within Queer South Asian bodies!

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the degree  
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## Abstract

This thesis investigates the relationship between queer South Asians and social norms, arguing that these norms play a critical role in shaping their queer selves, which in turn, impacts their queer authenticity. This investigation is framed through an exploration of relevant scholarship that examines heteronormativity, homonormativity and white normativity as social norms, alongside specific norms within South Asian culture that define their queerness. By applying these theoretical constructs to interviews conducted for this research, the thesis employs a thematic analysis to uncover the lived experience of queer South Asians and draws on inferences about their relationship to social norms. The study illustrates both the adherence to and resistance of social norms, ultimately arguing that queer South Asians actively negotiate with these norms to inform their queer selves and express their queer authenticity.

## Lay Summary

This thesis understands the role of various social norms, which are understood as societal rules and expectations and how they shape an individual's understanding of their queerness. Particularly focusing on queer South Asians, the study examines how social norms unique to this group influence the expression of their queerness and whether this expression feels genuine to them. By combining academic scholarship and conducting interviews, the thesis argues that queer South Asians navigate these social norms, either conforming to or resisting them to express a genuine sense of their queerness.

## Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Viplav Subramanian.

No Generative Artificial Intelligence tools were employed in the research process, development, or writing of the thesis. The interviews reported in Chapter 2-3 was covered by UBC Ethics Certificate number H24-01472.

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## Introduction

This project explores the relationship between the diasporic queer South Asians living in Metro Vancouver and social norms, arguing that queer South Asians navigate their queer selves in relation to these social norms. Social norms are rules and conventions of society that supposedly maintain order within it. Everyone in society has a relationship to these norms, they either adhere to or resist them. In fact, queer South Asians in Canada conform to social norms, such as heteronormativity, homonormativity and white normativity, through internalizing them and due to their hegemonic imposition. Adhering to such norms harms their queer self, damaging their queer authenticity.

However, like many others, queer South Asians also resist social norms, which allows them to express their authentic selves more freely. This project ultimately investigates how diasporic queer South Asians in Canada inform their queer selves through both adhering to and resisting social norms.

Navigating the complexities when researching lived experience, I learnt that the fluidity of research resembles water. It takes shape of the container, reflects the minds of participants, and the sensitivities of those it speaks to and about. In honouring these dynamics, I propose the need to move away from conventional practices of academic theorization and conceptualization. In this project, I hope to write with community, with those I speak for and about, people I relate to. To do so, I propose the need to view this project as an evolving body of knowledge. One that touches on the vast reality of queer South Asians, and the process of their self-making in relation to social norms. A project that



interrogates the dance between adhering and resisting social norms. To simply put this, the research questions shaping this project are:

*What social norms impact the queer self for South Asians? How do queer South Asians both adhere to and resist these social norms? How does adherence to social norms limit their queer self and authenticity? How does resisting social norms promote better queer authenticity for them?*

The project proposes that adhering to social norms such as heteronormativity, homonormativity, and white normativity constraints the queer self for diasporic South Asians living in Canada. While, each of these norms originates from their own sources of tension, materialize differently, and are combatted in their own unique ways, they are larger systems of society that work in conjunction with one other. In the next section, I briefly define and contextualize what entails the queer self and how adhering to social norms restricts the queer self and authenticity for South Asians. These ideas are further developed in Chapter 1, the literature review.

### The Queer Self

What constitutes the queer self?

To understand this, we need to examine the process through which “the self” comes into being. Mead (1934, 135) asserts, “the self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, [it] develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process”. This showcases that one’s understanding of their self is shaped by the aggregation of their social experiences and interactions, the people

around them and the society they belong to. In this context, the queer self, one's queerness within their self, is also formed through social interactions and experiences.

Building on this, I argue that the queer self is maintained through performance. Butler (1990, 178), who discusses gender as a social category, asserts that "gender requires a performance that is repeated." Here, gender, an aspect of one's identity or a part of their self, is crystallized through repeated acts of performing it. Butler (1990, 43) further argues that these performances occur within "a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."

Thus, gender or one's gendered self is produced through repeated performances that conform to rigid social categories and norms. To signify the role of social norms in shaping the self, we can revisit Mead (1934, 155-156) who states that the self arises "when the individual takes the attitude of the generalized other [the perspectives of society, its expectations and norms] toward himself". According to Mead, the self is formed by internalizing and performing an idea of that self, which is built by social norms and broader society. One's self, including one's queerness, generates as a result of social experiences and the repeated performance of what is socially permitted. In this context, the queer self, is then produced in relation to social norms. These norms, in turn, impact one's queer authenticity. But what is queer authenticity?

### Queer Authenticity

I describe queer authenticity as a practice that allows for the expression of the most genuine, visceral, and ethereal version of the queer self. Abrams et al. (2021, 271), in their research, consider authenticity as "the ability to define oneself and be genuine". They account for authenticity as "navigating identity and managing external expectations rooted

in systems of oppression” (Abrams et al. 2021, 271). This conceptualization of authenticity as a genuine expression of one’s self then accounts for intersectionality, oppression, geography, society and its norms.

In this project, queer authenticity is considered as the ability to express and embody what feels most real, visceral, and ethereally queer for South Asians, representing a version of the self that accounts for the field of exploration and the impact of social norms on one’s queerness. This means that queer authenticity can be negotiated through adhering to and resisting social norms.

What social norms influence the queer self and queer authenticity? In this project, I focus on the role of heteronormativity, homonormativity, and white normativity as vital social norms in shaping and defining the queer self of diasporic South Asians in Canada.

### Heteronormativity

Engel et al. (2011, 11) suggest that,

“heteronormativity designates a regime that organizes sex, gender and sexuality in order to match heterosexual norms. It denotes a rigid sexual binary of bodily morphology that is supported by gender and sexual identities”.

Heteronormativity enforces heterosexuality as the default and status quo, requiring, any gendered or sexual performance and identities to match heterosexual norms. In fact, heteronormativity establishes a rigid binarization of sex and gender, producing “the constitution of femininity and masculinity as the only intelligible forms of subjects” (Engel et al. 2011, 53). Heteronormativity then designates and designs queerness through such binarized identities and heterosexual logics, dichotomizing identity, restricting the

multiplicity of the queer self to exist. Here, the individuals I interviewed in my research share similar perspectives on heteronormativity. Nargis deems it as adhering to cisgender heterosexual ways of being, while Champa, believes it as the replication of heterosexuality in queerness through the binary relations of “man and woman”. Nalini associates it with the belief that being straight is normal and the default. And, Kamal says, it “means trying to fit into the straight world”. These perspectives signal at how adhering to heteronormativity may restrict one’s queer self, due to the social belief that heterosexuality is the default. It exposes the need to employ heteronormativity when analyzing how social norms are conceptualized in this research.

#### Homonormativity

According to Duggan (2002, 179), homonormativity is a politics that does not contest hegemonic heteronormative mechanics/conceptions/institutions, rather upholds and maintains them, while assuring the “possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption”. This indicates how homonormativity through upholding heteronormativity permits queerness to exist, however, in liminal, domesticated and hetero-legible forms. Homonormativity as an extension of heteronormativity, then, indicates what Moon (2010, 95) accounts for homonormativity as a social norm where individuals “embrace an originally oppressive discourse all the way to their own place at the larger societal table”. This reflects in how heteronormativity designates sex and gender to be heterosexual, while homonormativity permits queerness to exist within these same heterosexualized frameworks. Thus, homonormativity and heteronormativity work in conjunction to produce constraints in performing queerness that is authentic to queer South Asian

### White normativity

Through incorporating a racial lens, this study asserts the vitality of white normativity when examining the relation between social norms and the queer self and authenticity of South Asians in Canada. Ward (2008, 564) deems white normativity as when, “in racially diverse environments in which people of color are extended a degree of institutional power, whiteness [is] still a dominant ingredient of the environment’s culture and a determinant of prevailing norms for communication and behavior”. This exposes the naturalization of whiteness in ways of being, thinking, knowing and doing. In queer contexts and specifically this research, it reveals the demand for queer South Asians to conform to whiteness, erasing their culture and heritage from their queer self, damaging their queer authenticity.

The impact of social norms in limiting queer authenticity extends to many racialized individuals. However, as mentioned, this project particularly focuses on the queer South Asian diaspora in Canada, specifically those residing in Metro Vancouver. Their unique experience demands a consideration of social norms that are specific to South Asians in shaping their queer self. These social norms build upon and extend those discussed earlier. To address this particularity, I consider patriarchy as a significant factor in limiting authenticity for queer South Asians. When accounted for in conjunction with their unique history of queerness, the social norms considered here, specifically generate restrictions to their queer selves. These ideas are further explored in Chapter 1.

Therefore, these social norms work in collaboration to constrain and limit the queer self and queer authenticity for South Asians in Canada. Be queer, but on our terms! To answer the research questions posed in this project, the thesis employs theoretical

frameworks, examines interviewing as a methodological inquiry and conducts a thematic analysis of the interviews gathered when researching.

### Thesis Outline

Chapter 1 explores the theoretical frameworks that inform this project. It begins with understanding the concept of the queer self, as well as its relationship to social norms. It then revisits and expands on social norms vital to this project and accounts for their systemic and hegemonic impact on damaging queer authenticity. The chapter also provides specific examples of how social norms materialize to restrict queerness within the broader queer community, and then particularly focuses on their presence within queer South Asian communities. Finally, it argues for concerted manners through which queer South Asians can resist and negotiate these norms to better express their queer authenticity.

Chapter 2 explores the methodological inquiry of this research. It begins with introducing who I am and why this project should matter. It then defines and explores the specific method of inquiry employed in conducting research, interviews. The chapter further investigates what it means to conduct interviews, and discusses certain guiding philosophies that shape my approach to research. The chapter concludes with briefly introducing the research participants of the project.

Chapter 3 primarily conducts a thematic analysis of the interviews, but begins with contextualizing the interviews. It explains the interview process, questions employed during the interviews and how the participants were selected. It then provides a brief historical context of the unique population studied in the interviews, the queer South Asian diaspora in Canada. The chapter then analyzes the interviews through four themes to examine the relationship between queer South Asians and social norms.

The conclusion of this thesis re-asserts that the queer self for South Asians in Canada is defined and shaped by their relationship to social norms, ultimately impacting their queer authenticity. It ends with suggesting five future directions for expanding this research.

# Chapter 1: Literature Review

## **1.1 What goes in the Literature?**

This chapter provides theoretical frameworks used in this study through five sections to explain the relationship between 'queer South Asians' and 'social norms'. The first section defines the "queer self", as well as its relationship to 'social norms'. This section then connects the understanding of that queer self to the idea of 'queer authenticity'.

The second section investigates the concept of social norms, particularly social norms that are vital to this research, those of heteronormativity, homonormativity and white normativity and their damaging impact on one's queer authenticity. This section studies the systemic and hegemonic functioning of these social norms, emphasizing how they are maintained and imposed. This section also examines how the imposition of social norms on queer individuals shapes them as subjects of those norms, where their positions as subjects to social norms and adherence to them is a result of both the external imposition and the internalization of these norms.

The third section of the chapter delves into specific examples of how the broader queer community adheres to the social norms of heteronormativity, homonormativity and white normativity. It explores concepts such as body toxicity, and the dichotomization of sexualized preferences, that are informed by social norms within queer culture. This section highlights the imposition and internalization of social norms, exhibiting how adherence to these norms can have a damaging impact on one's queer authenticity.

The fourth section understands the specific relationship between queer South Asians and social norms. It theorizes that queer South Asians adhere to these social norms due to



the influence of patriarchy within their society and culture, and their unique history of queerness. A history in South Asia that has led queer South Asians to rely on white-western institutions to define and name their queerness. This highlights the influence of western sources, shaped by white normativity, in producing their queerness. The section concludes by considering the interaction of the social norms discussed earlier, the omni-presence of patriarchy and the history of queerness for South Asians as factors informing why queerness is built around social norms for South Asians.

In the final and fifth section, this chapter examines the ways in which queer South Asians resist social norms. It explores particular sites of resistance, such as rituals of rebellion, dis-identifications, and the Mehfil to argue that such resistance not only challenge social norms that are imposed and internalized by queer South Asians, but promote greater queer authenticity.

## **1.2 Introducing the Queer Self and Queer Authenticity**

### The Queer Self

In the introduction, we considered Mead's concept of the self, as a product of social experiences, interactions, and the internalization of societal expectations and norms. We employed Butler's theory of gender performance to consider how this understanding of the self is maintained through performance. Butler asserts that gender performance serves to reify one's identity, or aspects of it, through repeated enactments of socially accepted behaviours.

This showcases the social construction of "the self," and in the context of this project, signals at the process by which the queer self, one's queerness within their identity

is formed. Thus, the self emerges through the fabric of society, or what Mead (1934, 155) terms “the generalized other”, which refers to the broader society, its social norms and expectations.

Building on this, in *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed (2006) examines how the self is formed in relation to society and its norms. Ahmed (2006, 13) suggests that an individual’s self is constructed through aligning with societal space, stating that “the body orientates itself by lining itself up with the direction of the space it inhabits”. The self, or the individual’s understanding of it, is formed by aligning with the societal space it occupies and the expectations of that space. Here, the “line” metaphorically represents the normative paths or directions society establishes concerning one’s sexuality and sexual identifications. Ahmed (2006, 16) argues, “the lines that direct us, as lines of thought as well as lines of motion, are performative: they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition.”

Therefore, the “line” that defines the normative path of one’s sexuality, in this case, one’s queerness, is constructed through the repetition of social norms and conventions. The act of aligning with this line showcases how individuals orient themselves towards what society approves of the self. This illustrates how the self, here the queer self, is shaped by social norms. Before defining social norms, it is vital to connect the idea of the queer self and queer authenticity.

### Queer authenticity

In the introduction, we explored the idea of queer authenticity, and considered it as a practice that produces the most genuine expression of one’s queer identity. We employed

Abrams et al. to define authenticity and highlighted the relevance of considering it in relation to external expectations and societal norms.

This relation between authenticity and society is seen in what Hollier (2023), states, “authenticity [...] is a broad concept, encompassing the state in which each of these identities is enabled to flourish both privately and in relation to the social world.”

Authenticity, as a reflection of the most genuine expression of the self, then is shaped in relation to the social world, its norms and expectations. To understand this relationship, we need to contextualize social norms and investigate how they operate.

### **1.3 Social Norms and their Functioning**

#### Social Norms

There are various theorizations on social norms that have been developed by sociologists, anthropologists, economists and others. Each contributes to a broad and diverse understanding of social norms. For the purpose of this research, I rely on the definition of De et al. (2021, 23) who define them as, “behavioural rules that are supported by a combination of empirical and normative expectations”. Social norms are fundamentally conventions, rules and behaviours shaped by societal expectations.

To explain why individuals might adhere to social norms, Bicchieri (2016, 35) deems them as

“a rule of behavior such that individuals prefer to conform to it on condition that they believe that (a) most people in their relevant network conform to it (empirical expectations), and (b) most people in their relevant network believe they ought to conform to it (normative expectations)”.

Here, the widespread presence and adherence to social norms reflects in empirical expectations (beliefs of common behaviour), and the societal pressure to conform to them represents normative expectations. Thus, individuals follow social norms due to their widespread presence and the social expectation to conform to them. These expectations are imposed by society to maintain what Elster (2010, 1) accounts for social order, as “stable, regular, predictable patterns of behaviour”. This illustrates how social norms function, through their imposition and internalization, as tools for regulating and controlling one’s behavior to maintain social order. In the context of this project, social norms shape and define the queer self, and its performance.

### Heteronormativity

In the introduction, we employed Engel et al.'s framework to argue that heteronormativity enforces heterosexuality by imposing heterosexual norms onto gender and sexual identities and performances. We then considered how heteronormativity establishes a rigid binary of sex and gender by presenting masculinity and femininity as the only intelligible forms of subjects. We also suggested that heteronormativity shapes and defines queerness through heterosexualized logics and binarized identities, restricting the multiplicity of the queer self to exist, through dualistic confinements of male/female, top/bottom, and masc/femme.

We will now examine how heteronormativity is systematically produced, which involves seeing heteronormativity as a hegemonic force. Engel et al. (2011, 15) draw on Gramsci's concept of hegemony, describing it as “a power formation of the modern state that is grounded in civil society, [where] civil society [refers to] a ‘multitude of ... so-called private initiatives and activities. This includes schools, law courts, libraries and the media.”

Hegemony here refers to the power of the modern state, that is sustained through civil society's institutions such as political bodies, media, education, and the judicial system.

Lacroix et al. (2006, 428) argue that heteronormativity can be viewed as a hegemonic norm as it is a "rhetoric that naturalizes heterosexuality [and] permeates society's cultural, legal, political, religious, scientific, and social understandings of human sexuality." Here, through social policies, and the regulation of social behavior in political, interpersonal, and economic spheres, heteronormativity is naturalized and maintained as a hegemonic norm.

The hegemonic presence of heteronormativity is also strongly witnessed within queer communities. Lacroix et al. (2006, 427) note that "neither [queer] visibility nor [queer] acceptance is unconditional. While [for example] Queers are now permitted access to the media mainstream, they are welcome there only so long as they observe certain limits [such as being in a monogamous relationship, practicing binary gender performances] imposed upon them by the conventions of the mainstream's heterosexist socio-sexual order." This exposes the imposition of heterosexualized logics within queer performance and selfhood. Heteronormativity as a hegemonic norm, demands queer individuals to internalize and even perform heteronormativity, which limits and diminishes the authenticity of their queer selves.

In fact, heteronormativity produces another systemic norm, homonormativity to further impact the formation and performance of the queer self and queer authenticity.

### Homonormativity

In the introduction, we considered homonormativity as an extension of heteronormativity, where employing Duggan's framework I argued that homonormativity upholds and maintains heteronormativity. Homonormativity produces a depoliticized, domesticated form of gay culture that is anchored in traditional domestic values. This allows queerness to exist, but only in forms that conform to heteronormative social expectations. Moon (2010, 95), explains that homonormativity is the embracing of an originally oppressive discourse in order to secure a place within broader society. While heteronormativity dictates sex and gender as inherently heterosexual, homonormativity permits queerness to exist, but only within heterosexual frameworks, for example permitting queer marriages but only in heterosexualized fashions, such as adhering to monogamy.

McIntosh (2023, 5) argues this point by asserting that "the origins of homonormativity are tracked through the thick terrain of binary gender definitions, [and] performances [...] of normative restraints to sexuality that manufacture binary lines." Homonormativity produces new constraints that tame queer bodies into adhering to hetero-legible existences. These constraints produced by homonormativity, as mentioned, permit queerness to exist, however, in heterosexualized fashions. This indicates how the two systemic structures shape what can be, or rather, what is allowed to be queer.

There are a racial and class elements to homonormativity. McIntosh (2023, 7) asserts that homonormativity is "accomplished through a discourse of erasure and assimilation into white middle-class heteronormative identities." As discussed in the introduction, white normativity is witnessed when whiteness is sanctioned as the dominant cultural ingredient and a determining factor in defining one's self and behaviour. We deemed white normativity as naturalizing whiteness, erasing the culture and heritage of racialized queer

individuals, damagingly shaping their queer selves. The racialized constraints of homonormativity are particularly harmful to racialized queer individuals because they enact a two-fold process of erasing the unique cultural contexts that define racialized queerness and demand assimilation of racialized queer identities into whiteness and white-sanctioned queer sensibilities. Thus, homonormativity is harmful to racialized queer individuals' authenticity and selfhood.

Since these social norms, hetero and homonormative, operate hegemonically and structurally, they demand that individuals adhere to them. This conformity necessitates cultural erasure and necessarily limits the possibility of queer authenticity for racialized queer individuals, including South Asians.

#### How are queer individuals subjected to Social Norms?

According to Butler (1998, 8), hegemonic power conditions the political formation and regulation of subjects, and is the means of their subjugation. In this context, the hegemonic power of norms such as heteronormativity leads to the formation and regulation of queerness and queer individuals as subjects who are 'subject' to heteronormativity. This in turn shapes their understanding and performance of their queer selves. Butler (1998, 3) explains that social norms exert power by, "first appear[ing] as external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination, [then] assum[ing] a psychic form that constitutes the subject's self-identity". This mean that individuals internalize social norms such that social norms "not only acts on a subject but, in a transitive sense, enacts the subject into being" (Butler 1998, 13).

As such, queer racialized subjects are formed, in part, by the imposition and internalization of hegemonic social norms such as heteronormativity, homonormativity, and white normativity.

#### **1.4 Examples of Social Norms impacting Queer Communities**

##### Manifestations of social norms

In this section, I briefly account for how hegemonic norms operate to restrict queer performance and selfhood within the broader queer community. Specifically, how the internalization and imposition of social norms like heteronormativity, homonormativity, and white normativity, which prevail in broader society, generate specific social norms within the queer community. These norms manifest through body toxicity and the dichotomization of sexual preferences. This literature merely represents a few of the many ways in which these norms are imposed and internalized to damage queer authenticity.

##### The Body

By naturalizing a binary in gendered and sexual performances, heteronormativity perpetuates the hyper-masculinization and hyper-feminization of society. Within queer contexts, as Halkitis (2019, 107) points out, hypermasculinity among queer/gay men is maintained because they are “exposed to the same circumstances that share and reinforce binary gender norms and hegemonic masculinity as any other boy or man”. The binarization of identity produced by heteronormativity, along with the valorisation of hypermasculinity, imposes constraints on the queer self for queer/gay men. These heteronormative expectations result in a heightened awareness of one’s “sexual roles (where receptive partners are seen as less masculine), the pitch of one’s voice (high voices are considered



more feminine), and physique (muscularity becomes synonymous with masculinity)” (Halkitis 2019, 109). Such social discourses are informed by heteronormativity and maintained in expressions like “no pecs, no sex” (Halkitis 2019, 113), or preferences such as, “Masc 4 Masc” and “No Fats, No Fems, No Asians.”

Such constraints on the queer self are more prominently witnessed in racialized queer communities. As Halkitis (2019, 127) argues, racialized queer men “need to reconcile their gay identity and their racial and/or ethnic identities to integrate all aspects of who they are, both with communities of color and society at large.” Racialized queer individuals are required to accommodate their racial and queer identities in a way that conforms to both heteronormative standards and hypermasculine ideals. It reveals how the imposition and internalization of social norms are amplified to limit and restrict queer performance and selfhood for queer racialized individuals, including South Asians.

### Sexual Preferences

Underwood (2003, 5), while exploring sexual roles within the gay community, highlights the stark separation between “tops” and “bottoms,” where bottoms are “severely stigmatized because [they are] getting ass-fucked, [which is] considered feminizing and shameful.” This stigmatization of bottoms is produced from heteronormative and homonormative frameworks that dichotomize sexual preferences (an aspect of one’s identity). It exposes that “the separation of top and bottom roles as a mimicry of heterosexual functions and a form of self-oppression” (Underwood 2003, 11). This signifies the legitimization of queer relations and roles through heteronormative logics, that then damages one’s queer authenticity.

When exploring the racialization of binarized sexual identities, we witness how such social norms disproportionately impact the racialized queer self and performance. Fung (1991, 5) states that the conflation of “Asian and anus” leads to the creation of a racialized sexual binary, producing the social identities of the white top and the Asian (South Asian) bottom. This showcases the interaction between heteronormative and white normative structures amplifying an already problematic binary, limiting the ability of the racialized queer self to exist beyond these constraints.

As Kendall (2006, 6) argues,

“rather than “enabling disruption” or the “occasion for a radical re-articulation of the symbolic horizon in which bodies come to matter,” what gets re-inscribed are familiar sexist and racialized power relationships in which the active/passive gender binary is inscribed”.

This illustrates how rather than promoting authenticity in one’s queer self, which may exist beyond such binaries, society produces conformity and social legibility, constraining the multiplicity of the racialized queer self.

## **1.5 Social Norms and Queer South Asians**

### Queer South Asians

Adhering to social norms such as heteronormativity, homonormativity and white normativity are damaging to many queer racialized individuals, including South Asians. In this section, I theorize the specific ways that queer performance and selfhood of South Asians is constrained. This is in part because South Asian culture is both steeped in patriarchy and a unique history of queerness. In fact, Shah (1998, 481), writes that South

Asian queers are “silenced in both South Asian patriarchal societies and the white queer communities in North America and Europe.”

### Patriarchy

To understand how patriarchy shapes the creation of the queer self amongst South Asians, we need to define the concept of patriarchy. According to Poyares (2023, 120), “the term “patriarchy” was originally coined by sociologists and anthropologists to describe societies where both the public and private spheres are organised following a gender-based hierarchy that privileges individuals identified as male”. This reflects the social organization and functioning of societies, where cisgender men are privileged over others. The connection between patriarchy and queerness is highlighted by Hapke (2013, 11), who argue, that patriarchy has a “relationship to social structures and systems such as capitalism and race/class/caste”. Patriarchy not only privileges men but influences other social categories such as race, class, caste, and sexuality.

In South Asian societies, as in any other society, patriarchy is “maintained and perpetuated through relations and modes of production, State regulated and monitored laws and policies, control of sexuality and monopoly in religion and culture. All of these factors reinforce and feed into each other to strengthen patriarchy” (Nainar 2013, 1). These interconnected social actors reinforce and perpetuate patriarchy, leading to patriarchal traditions being at the core of social functioning in many (South Asian) communities.

The practices emerging from patriarchal social structures vary, but in the case of South Asia, patriarchy is evident in practices such as femicide, female infanticide, child marriage, Sati, Johar, sexual violence against vulnerable populations, restrictive gender roles, as well as queer-phobia, transphobia, and homophobia. The structuring of South

Asian society around patriarchal norms has led to the emergence of queer-phobic and queer-resistant attitudes, severely restricting the expression of queer identities. Moreover, patriarchy, by privileging cis-masculinity, sustains heteronormativity through enforcing rigid, heterosexual gender roles and sexual identities.

The second crucial reason for constraints on authentic queer selfhood and performance for South Asians stems from their distinct history of queerness. A history that began with an abundant presence of queerness and moved into colonial repression and intolerance, which has resulted in a reliance on western queerness, a queerness that is both homonormative and racialized as white. Although this history is specific to South Asia, it plays a vital role in shaping the experience of queerness for South Asian diasporas. In Chapter 2, we explore the interconnectedness between diasporas and those living in their countries of origin, which helps address the tensions surrounding how this history applies to the queer South Asian diaspora in Canada.

### Queer South Asian History

The history of queerness for South Asians is rooted with an abundant presence of queer figures in South Asian culture. In *The Lotus of Another Color*, Kaushalya Bannerji traces the history of "homosexuality" in the Indian subcontinent, examining references to oral congress, "eunuchs" in the Kama Sutra, sexual dualisms dating back to 3000 BCE, and tantric rituals, among other aspects. Various scholars, such as Mehrotra (2021), Srinivas (2020), and Karla (2010), have examined the vital and abundant presence of queerness in mythological scriptures, historical figures, ancient paintings, architecture, and literature.

However, such abundance and authenticity of queerness was severely damaged during the colonial rule. Tayyab (1999, 1221) argues that "hegemonic forces in Europe

fashioned strategies of exclusion, grounded in a racial dichotomy between human and sub-human, or civilized and savage". As a result, queer presence and practices in South Asia were deemed as "savage" and in need of control, disciplining, and erasure. As Tayyab (1999, 1223) further asserts, "the salvation of lesser races rested in subjugation by Europe". The British criminalized homosexual behavior under Section 377, a colonial law passed in 1861, and the implementation of the controversial Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which proclaimed transgender individuals as "criminal tribes" or hereditary criminals (Mehrotra 2021, 17-18). Such colonial laws reinforced queer-phobic sentiments and institutionalized the stigmatization, policing, and erasure of queer communities in South Asian culture. Only in September 2018, as Mehrotra (2021, 3) states, the Supreme Court in now India, decriminalized Section 377, as an anti-colonial act.

The internalization of this colonial mentality has led to an overreliance of South Asians to understand queerness through the lens of the "liberal" and "open-minded" west. This western understanding of queerness, as mentioned before, is formed by heteronormative, homonormative, and white normative logics. Due to this, queer South Asians learn about queerness from sources shaped by these limiting social norms, which restricts their ability to imagine what is possible within their queerness.

#### How is South Asian Queerness defined by Social Norms?

Cultural norms, social beliefs, and the politics of interpersonal relationships within South Asian societies are often such that they do not permit queerness to exist at all, and even if it does, only in limited, acceptable, hetero-legible fashions. One of the main tools of maintaining this restricted queer self in South Asian culture, as Luther (2023, 6) says, is the Hindi phrase "log kya kahenge" (what will people say/think?). This phrase showcases the

policing of one's identity, where adherence to social norms is imposed through a hyper-consideration of others' judgments about one's choices/self, including their queerness. This exposes the need to adhere to social norms, reinforcing how queerness is expressed only in socially acceptable fashions.

Furthermore, the wide-spread presence of queer-phobic sentiments, patriarchy, heteronormativity, traditional gender roles, and other factors constantly reproduce normative functioning within South Asian culture. In the context of queerness, these norms reduce what is authentically queer to what is socially permitted.

However, the presence of restrictive social norms also generates the capacity to resist them. The constraints imposed on the queer self provide a unique opportunity for South Asians to challenge them. It offers the possibility of authenticity to better exist, the capacity to celebrate alternative ways of performance and selfhood, the hope for better queer futures.

## **1.6 Negotiating with Social Norms**

### Resisting social norms

In this section, I argue that although adhering to the social norms previously discussed impacts the formation of one's queer self and constrains their queer authenticity, individuals can and do negotiate and resist these norms. I build on models of scholarship that offer concretized manners of resisting oppressive social norms to move toward queer liberation.

To operationalize resisting social norms, we can draw from Lacroix et al.'s (2006) interpretation of Gluckman's rituals of rebellion. These rituals, as Lacroix et al. (2006, 430)

explain, "grant their participants temporary license to violate selected sociocultural rules; in doing so, they provide much-needed outlets for expressing and relieving social tensions." That is to say, rituals provide individuals with the capacity to challenge and negotiate social norms, helping them better navigate their self and what feels authentic to them. By engaging in such rituals of rebellion, we can create and perform a queer self that is more genuine and authentic to us. Muñoz's (1999, 4-19) writes about such resistance when he discusses the concept of 'disidentification', as a

"a survival strategy that [...] that is not monocausal or monothematic, one that is calibrated to discern a multiplicity of interlocking identity components and the ways in which they affect the social", a method that "negotiates strategies of resistance within the flux of discourse and power".

Disidentification is a powerful tool against assimilation because it by allows a multiplicity of identities to exist and challenges the systemic functioning of social norms to promote queer authenticity. This approach can be used to politicize diverse collectives of racialized queer communities, empowering them to conduct a resistance to social norms.

### The queer mehfil

Here, I argue that the mehfil serves as a channel for queer South Asians to resist and negotiate social norms to better express their queer selves. In South Asian culture, 'mehfil' refers to a gathering or a social event. However, when examined with greater care, mehfil presents as having powerful abilities to transcend space, time, culture, and communal relationships. I was reminded of mehfil while attending "Intiha: An Evening Conversation with Ali Sethi" on November 21st, 2024, at the Liu Institute for Global Issues at UBC. During

the event, Sethi spoke about how the mehfil provides him with the capacity to create mystical music. This perspective reminded me of how in South Asian traditions of musical curation, the mehfil is inherently queer.

The mehfil demonstrates the abundant possibilities for alternative existences to persist, a space where one can move beyond what is socially permitted and allowed. The mehfil, through its immersion in spirited musical traditions and a unique form of social interaction, permits fluidity in one's self. The presence of chai and naashta (snacks), the playful teasing in poetic conversations, and in what is consumed both physically and spiritually, the mehfil creates a communal atmosphere, a transcendent space. The mehfil thus encourages cultural fluidity, and a form of selfhood that develops in relation to others and to community, all of which, for me, signify an inherently queer space. I propose that expanding the influence of the mehfil into everyday life through permitting such fluidity in culture, selfhood and interpersonal relations, aids in the visceral enactment of promoting queer authenticity.

Through the creation of such spaces that honour and embrace authenticity, queer South Asians challenge restrictive social norms, to promote an authentic selfhood. The mehfil, then, displays the potential for alternative forms of identity and existence to be celebrated.

### **1.7 Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter explores the relationship between queer South Asians and social norms that shapes their selfhood and authenticity. The chapter investigates the "queer self", and its relation to the social norms of heteronormativity, homonormativity, and white normativity, and South Asian history and culture to showcase their role in shaping the queer



self and queer authenticity, and emphasizes on the importance of resisting social norms through rituals of rebellion, dis-identification. It views the mehfil as a form of resistance that might allow us to (re)imagine a South Asian queerness.

# Chapter 2: Methodology

## **2.1 What goes in the methodology?**

This chapter examines the methodological framework employed to interview and analyze the research questions and answers. The first section contextualizes the project by exploring my own subjectivity as the researchers and examines what motivated me to conduct this research.

In the second section, I focus on the specific method of inquiry employed in conducting research, interviews. The section outlines various guiding philosophies that inform this research, showcasing on the scholarship in which I am rooted.

The third and final section introduces the participants of the interviews, which includes eight individuals from the queer South Asian diasporic community who reside in Metro Vancouver. To connect this niche group to the broader queer South Asian community, this section then investigates the interconnectedness of diasporic communities and the countries they come from.

## **2.2 Contextualizing this Project**

### Subjectivity

Similar to Facebook's extensive list of identity attributes born from political and social circumstances, the composite of who I am entails being a first-generation queer, non-binary, able-bodied, agnostic, South Asian immigrant in Canada. However, this list does not truly represent who I am. The depths of my individuality move far beyond such labels and

include the collection of experiences, moments, and fragments that shape how I see the world and the change I aspire to create.

To honour the complexities of my identity and those I speak about, I suggest the need to employ Puar's (2007, 211-212) concept of assemblages, "a series of dispersed but mutually implicated and messy networks", one that is attuned to "interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency". Here, assemblages indicates how identity is not fixed but is fluid, complex, and dynamic. It is a messy composition of one's self that interacts with temporality and spatiality to inform itself. The assemblage of who I am, a dynamic composite of various social constructions such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, and numerous other identity markers, are only some of the things that create my personhood. It is an evolving self that is in relation to larger social structures, influencing my relationship to the world and to this research.

Thus, who I am has been shaped by the world and social groups I am surrounded by. Re-visiting the hegemonic presence of social norms and the demand to adhere to them as explored in the previous chapter, I've personally experienced the need to suppress parts of my queer identity to conform to what is considered as socially acceptable. This has led to the dismissal of what feels most authentic to my queer self. My journey of both adhering to and resisting these social norms as a manner of negotiating my queer self and authenticity has led me to this project.

It has informed my desire to understand questions such as: What does it mean to be South Asian and queer within each and in both of these communities? What social norms shape one's self, and their queerness? Does adhering to these norms feel inauthentic to one's self? Do others feeling similarly? What does resistance to such norms look like? How

do we create and sustain an authentic sense of queerness within our racialized bodies, while navigating social norms enforced upon us?

### Why does this research matter?

Santos et al. (2007, xix) suggest epistemological privilege was granted to modern science since 7th CE paving western supremacy and the suppression of other non-scientific forms of knowledge, as well as the dismissal of “subaltern social groups whose social practices were informed by such knowledges”. In fact, even today, this problematic privileging is noticed, where, “the dominance of Western epistemological frameworks has significantly influenced the dissemination and validation of knowledge within academic settings, subsequently marginalising non-Western, Indigenous, and alternative knowledge systems” (Omodan 2024, 2). This signals at the politics of knowledge production, where western institutions, through political and economic power have privileged their knowledge over others, have shaped and moulded global knowledge systems.

In this context, Fung’s (1991, 2) assertion that “South Asians hardly figure at all in North American popular representations, and those few images [are] ostensibly devoid of sexual connotation”, exposes an inadequate engagement with queer South Asian histories. This epistemic erasure of their experiences signifies the need to establish greater knowledge on queer South Asian lives, while acknowledging scholars who have already done so, such as Gopinath, Puar, Dasgupta, Arondekar, Shah, Bannerji, and others.

As a response to this epistemic erasure, I view this project as what hooks (1991, 2) deems as liberatory practice, one that is “fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, [where] no gap exists between theory and practice.” By theorizing the constraints placed on South Asians in performing and embodying authentic queerness

through adherence to social norms, and examining the resistance to these norms as an act of liberation, this research is an integral part of the broader struggle for liberation. This is particularly needed in the face of risings queer-phobia, transphobia, and racism around the globe. Therefore, I argue that this project is vital for generating space within academia for queer South Asian lives, serving as a scholarly inquiry and a liberatory practice that negotiates for the capacity to better practice and maintain one's queer authenticity.

### **2.3 Interviewing**

#### Methodology

To illustrate the relationship between queer South Asians and social norms and address the research questions of this project, I conduct research through interviews.

Browne et al. (2010, 101-235) suggest that when researching queer subjects,

“interviews provide an exploration of various possibilities rather than those constituted through a pre-established system, meanings of narratives are in fact actively determined through unfolding interactions of the interview, interviews provide fluid construction of bodies and spaces [allowing] for the exploration of difference, contestation of rigid categories as well as addressing moments of disturbance, brems and unfixity”.

Interviews permit the exploration of various possibilities by moving beyond pre-established systems, where meanings of narratives are defined through dynamic interactions during the interview. This promotes the fluid construction of identities and spaces. This process further allows for the investigation of differences, challenges rigid categories, addressing instances of disruption and uncertainty. By employing this

perspective, I intend to generate a web of interconnected, and dynamic ideas through the stories shared with me during the interviews.

However, conducting interviews is a complex and difficult process that requires navigating sensitive dialogues, extracting knowledge, and carefully considering diverse or differing opinions. Browne et al. (2010) highlight some limitations of using interviews that are relevant to my research. They pose the following questions,

“if, as queer thinking argues, subjects and subjectivities are fluid, unstable and perpetually becoming, how can we gather ‘data’ from those tenuous and fleeting subjects using the standard methods of data collection such as interviews or questionnaires? What meanings can we draw from, and what use can we make of, such data when it is only momentarily fixed and certain? ” (Browne et al. 2010, 1).

To respond to these concerns, I attempt to be considerate of the tensions that arise from universalizing and generalizing individual experiences, and recognize the shifting nature of social experiences across different spaces and identities. I address these considerations in Chapter 3, where I analyze the interview data.

### Guiding Philosophical Principles

The first guiding philosophy is employing ‘felt theory’, which Million (2013, 30), describes as “community knowledge, knowledge that interactively informs our positions”. In this research, I hope to explore the visceral experiences of my community, their emotions, and moments of liberation when examining their relationships to social norms.

The second guiding philosophy comes from Kimmerer (2013, 100), who in her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, says, “the language scientists speak, however precise, is based

on a profound error in grammar, an omission, a grave loss in translation”, instead indicating the vitality of engaging with a grammar of animacy. In my thesis, I aspire to embody Kimmerer’s grammar of animacy by bringing the experiences of those I speak about to life, through holding space for their pain, erasure, joy, and resistance.

The third guiding philosophy is drawn from the works of Anzaldúa and Moraga (1981, 25), who propose a "theory of flesh", “one where the physical realities of our lives, our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity”. In this research, I hope to enliven the flesh and blood experiences of my community as a call to necessitate generative change for our betterment. A call that seeks to foster greater authenticity in our racialized queer selves through negotiating and resisting social norms.

The final guiding philosophy is the practice of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), that Dion et al. (2020, 123), deem as when “expertise is mutually shared to develop a more enhanced understanding of the research topic.” In my research, I generate knowledge through shared authority with my community to reflect the principles of CBPR. High (2009, 13) describes shared authority as "the cultivation of trust, the development of collaborative relationships, and shared decision-making." I attempt to build trust and foster reciprocal relationships with my interviewees by discussing my inferences and conclusions of their lived experience with them, conversing rather than extracting knowledge, and providing them the capacity to suggest edits to my work.

Therefore, in this project, my goal is to animate the lives of those I speak about, allow space for emotion, and to honour their experiences the best I can.

## **2.4 Research Participants**

### Who is part of this research?

In my research, I interview eight individuals from the queer South Asian diasporic community living in Metro Vancouver. Each participant has unique lived experiences, a distinct sense of their queer-selves, relationships, and social contexts. However, they share frustrations with the larger society, particularly around the social demands to restrict their queer selves through adhering to social norms. They also express shared sentiment in wanting to resist social norms to better express their queer selves.

To protect and maintain the anonymity of the participants in this study, I have used names of different flowers in Hindi/Urdu as pseudonyms for each interviewee.

### The following are the names of those I interviewed –

Gulbahar – Daisy

Kamal – Lotus

Nalini – Tulip

Champa – Magnolia

Chamelee – Jasmine

Gudhal – Hibiscus

Nargis – Daffodil

Surajmukhi – Sunflower

Here, I draw on Absolon's (2011, 51) concept of the flower who discuss its relevance in generating a holistic framework of Indigenous methodologies. In this context, by using



flowers as pseudonyms, I symbolically represent each participant as a distinct member of a deeply interconnected system of knowledge production within my project.

The individuals interviewed in my research are all part of the South Asian diaspora in Canada. Therefore, any inferences made in the interview analysis of the relationship between queer South Asians and social norms are specific to this particular population. To be able to more broadly apply these findings to queer South Asians globally requires us to understand the relationship between South Asian diasporas and those living in South Asian countries. This includes considering the tensions and similarities that exist between the two groups, and how they inform one another.

#### Vancouver to South Asia

In this research, all participants interviewed reside in Metro Vancouver, representing the vast and expansive South Asian diasporic community. Each individual has a unique relationship to South Asian culture, which in turn shapes their queer identity. In this research, I hope to highlight the tensions between diasporic communities and those living in the nation-state, investigating the differences and similarities that emerge when navigating various geographies of space and culture. This signifies the ways in which social norms are adhered to and resisted, shaping one's queer self across individuals and spaces.

To account for these tensions, I employ Allen's (2012, 216) conceptualization of diaspora, as produced from the "conditions of movement and emplacement, and processes of disidentification, but also relationality". This definition indicates that diasporas are born out of movement and produce both disidentifications and a strong relationality with the nation-state.

### What tensions arise between diasporas and the nation-state?

To understand the tensions between the diasporic South Asian queer community in Metro Vancouver and the broader queer South Asian community, I draw on Ahmed (1999, 341), who argues that such tensions emerge from "the difference that migration might make to the constitution of selves and others." This indicates how migration alters individual's perception of themselves and the expression of their identities. In this context, it implies that the ways in which social norms are adhered to and resisted may differ between the queer South Asian diaspora in Metro Vancouver and those living in South Asian countries or other diasporic communities.

In fact, queer South Asians living in Canada (the west), experience distinct differences in their lives and identities to those living in South Asian countries (the non-west). Mansalansan (2006, 230) highlights this by arguing that "non-Western sexual ideologies do not follow a unilinear assimilative process into Western modern sexual ideologies but rather involve syncretic processes that create alternative sexual politics, cultures, and identities." This exposes the differences between western and non-western sexual ideologies, where diverse non-western understandings of sexual and gender expression do not mirror western identities. This difference is particularly relevant when examining the experiences of queer South Asians in Vancouver (the west) and those in South Asian countries, revealing the tensions that emerge from studying diverse social geographies.

How do we ease the tensions that arise between diasporas and those residing in the nation-state?

My primary assertion is that queer South Asians in both the Metro Vancouver diaspora and South Asian countries share significant similarities in their experiences and lives. This is due to the relationship between the diaspora and the local being reciprocal, each influences and shapes the other. As Gopinath (2005, 2-6) suggests, "the concept of diaspora may not be as resistant or contestatory to the forces of nationalism or globalization as it may first appear", further showcasing that "queer desires, bodies, and subjectivities become dense sites of meaning in the production and reproduction of notions of 'culture,' 'tradition,' and communal belonging both in South Asia and in the diaspora". The inability to separate diaspora from nationalism and globalization, as well as the interconnectedness of culture and tradition across different spaces, highlights the reciprocal relationship between queer South Asians in the diaspora and in South Asian countries.

In fact, I would argue that the differences between queer South Asians in the diaspora and those in South Asian countries dissipate due to the understanding of queerness for South Asians being shaped by a white-western perspective. Warner et al. (2005, 4) argue that "whiteness is enacted in subtle and overt ways in institutions and social spaces and is organized to maintain a world racial order of white dominance." This highlights the influence of white normative logics in shaping the queer self for South Asians, both in the diaspora and in South Asia. Mansalansan, who references Puar (1998, 234), further explains that "non-Western queers are exposed to gay and lesbian cultures through established tours and mass media connected to such industries, lead[ing] to the visualization of the West as a haven for various queers." This indicates the dominance of white-western normative queerness in both colonized and settler-colonial spaces, South Asia and Canada. It further showcases how social norms, that stem from global social

structures, restrict the queer self for South Asians, both in Metro Vancouver and in South Asian countries.

Puar (1998, 410) argues that “queer diasporas are not immune from forms of cultural nationalism; in fact, they may even rely on them... in the case of South Asian queer diasporas, this regime is a privileged signifier of not only North American and European geopolitical spaces but also class, caste, communal identity, and gender.” This suggests that queer South Asian diasporas are deeply connected to the cultural nationalism, social identities, and norms of South Asian countries.

Employing these perspectives, I argue that while differences may exist between these populations, significant similarities emerge due to globalization and the resulting hegemony of a heteronormative, homonormative and white normative discourse. I hope to focus on these similarities to showcase how globalized social norms and structures both constrain and promote queer authenticity for South Asians.

## **2.5 Chapter Conclusion**

In this chapter, we investigated the methodological approach and framework guiding this research. The chapter began by contextualizing the project through reflecting on my life experiences, that shape my motivation to conduct this research. It then highlighted the relevance of this research within broader scholarship and acts of knowledge production. The chapter then examined interviews as a method of inquiry, and outlined the guiding philosophies that shape this inquiry. Lastly, the chapter introduced the participants in this study, the eight individuals who are a part of the queer South Asian diasporic community residing in Metro Vancouver. To understand the connections between this particular group

and the broader queer South Asians community, the chapter examined the relations between diasporic communities and those residing in the countries of their origin. Through establishing the foundations of the methodology of this study, the next chapter provides a thematic analysis of the interviews conducted and an exploration of the lived experiences of the participants.

# Chapter 3: Interview Analysis

## **3.1 What goes in the Interview Analysis?**

In this chapter, I conduct a thematic analysis of eight interviews that are a part of the research. The purpose of this chapter is to expand our understanding of the relationship between social norms and queer South Asians by integrating the theoretical constructs introduced in Chapter 1 with the lived experiences of the interviewees.

The first section provides an overview of the questions employed in the interviews and explaining the process of selecting participants. This section examines how individual experiences need to be carefully extrapolated to draw broader conclusions about the phenomena studied in this research. It also touches on the specific history and context of the population studied in this project—the queer South Asian diaspora in Canada, particularly those residing in Metro Vancouver.

The second section presents a thematic analysis of four themes: Who are the participants, and how did they come to understand their queerness? How do participants identify with South Asian culture, and how does it influence their queerness? How do participants situate themselves in Metro Vancouver, and how does that impact their queerness? In what ways do participants adhere to or resist social norms?

Each theme explores the social and lived experiences of the eight interviewees, connecting these stories to the theoretical frameworks outlined in Chapter 1 to address the research questions.

## **3.2 Overview of Interviews**

### Questions used in the interviews

1. How do you identify as?
2. When did you learn about queerness and what it means to you?
3. What parts of the queer community do you identify with and don't?
4. Do you feel the need to restrict yourself in the queer and/or South Asian community? If so, how?
5. Do you think you lean into social norms?
6. Do you think it is harmful or helpful to recreate social norms within ourselves and our community?
7. Do you resist recreating social norms? If so, how?
8. What do you think resisting social norm does for our community?

During the interviews, I noticed that these questions were a starting point that developed into wider of conversations, where each participant shared rich personal stories that connected directly to the research questions of this project.

### How did I determine who to interview?

The only criteria for selecting participants was that the individual needed to be queer, South Asian and living in Metro Vancouver. I advertised a call for participants on my personal social media platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram and by reaching out to various community organizations, such as Sher Vancouver, a queer South Asian non-profit. The process of selection was based purely on a first-come, first-serve basis. This was

employed to avoid any researcher biases in selection and to give everyone who expressed interest an equal chance to participate.

Before diving into the interviews, it is vital to reflect on the unique histories of queer South Asian individuals living in Canada in order to honour their presence and stories in this research. As Kim (2023, 6) highlights, "racialized migrant men [particularly South Asian men] who did not have access to the possibility of respectable domesticity due to state policies engaged in a type of creative experiments, creating alternative forms of kinship, intimacy, and social life. They queered relations, challenging state-imposed normativities and institutions of hetero nuclear families and finding other ways of relating". This form of queering exposes the deep relationship that South Asian diasporas in Canada have with queerness, one that is heavily influenced by state laws, immigration policies, and the broader social, cultural, and political climate.

Here, multiple intersectional identities become apparent, making queer South Asians in Canada, as Kanji (2017, 44) notes, "vulnerable to both racism and homophobia." These factors suggest a distinct queer experience for South Asians in Canada, one that is shaped by their status as migrants, as well as the geographical, social, and cultural conditions of the Canadian society. Different spaces produce a different set of experiences. To fully grasp how varied geographies influence such experiences, we need a comparative study that transcend borders, a potential direction for future research that is explained in the conclusion of this project.

Within the scope and for the purpose of this thesis, it is helpful to consider those interviewed as a window into understanding the complex relation between social norms and queer South Asians globally. To carefully extrapolate broader inferences from individual



experiences, first, requires us to consider the importance of these distinct individual experiences.

I want to create space to understand the particularities that emerge when researching individual identities and the importance of fleshing out these distinct experiences. Doing so helps us recognize how the relationship between queer South Asians and social norms is not static; it shifts and transforms depending on the individual.

These differences are influenced by various social factors such as class, caste, gender, sexuality, religious beliefs, and more. I assert revisiting Puar's (2007) concept of assemblages to highlight the complexities that arise amongst social identities as the root of these differences. This framework helps explain how social norms materialize in different ways across queer South Asian experiences.

To honour these differences, I draw on Ponniah et al. (2020), who emphasize the crucial intersections of caste and queerness in India. Experiences cited by them of

“a matrimonial advertisement in which a mother seeks a same-caste, vegetarian groom for her gay son, highlights the casteist nature of intimacy among gay men in Indian society”, “the 'right' kind of queer ha[ving] the caste capital of language” and “Dhiren Bhorsa who studies geographies of urban desire on Grindr, in an interview, not[ing], some profiles clearly mention[ing] that "Good Jaat-8 inches" and others mention[ing] "no SC/ST and only Brahmins"” (Ponniah et al. 2020, 4-10), expose how caste is weaponized within queer culture in India, particularly within queer desirability and queer selfhood.

This showcases the role of discriminatory casteist attitudes within queer communities and signifies the necessity of recognizing identity as a means of honouring the differences that exist in such social experiences.

Understanding individual and group (diasporas and local communities) differences provides a vital lens to examine the complexities of identity. The unique assemblage of one's identity shapes their experiences to create a distinct reality for them. In this project, I aspire to strike a balance between carefully acknowledging these differences while considering them in relation to one another and broader systemic structures such as social norms. I do this to draw broader conclusions from the interviews conducted in this research and better understand the relationship between queer South Asians and social norms.

The following section provides a thematic analysis through four themes. Each theme accounts for the social and lived experiences of the eight interviewees, connecting their stories to the theoretical frameworks introduced in Chapter 1.

### **3.3 Thematic Analysis**

#### Who are the participants, and how did they come to understand their queerness?

To start, who are the eight individuals interviewed?

Gulbahar prefers to identify simply as "queer." For a long time, he felt it was easier to identify as "gay," but with more exposure through social networks and media, he became more comfortable with the broader, inclusive term "queer" to express his non-heterosexual desires.

Nalini identifies as "queer," as this umbrella terminology allows her to embrace her identity as a cis-woman, asexual, and pansexual. She sees it as the closest expression to what seems most authentic to her queer self. Nalini is in a relationship with a cis-straight man, which, many a time, leads to others viewing her as part of a "heteronormative straight couple." This perception reduces her queerness to what is legible to others. For example, when visiting doctors who assume she is heterosexual based on her relationship, she struggles with questions like "Are you sexually active?" or "Are you pregnant?" despite not engaging in sexual activity. Such social interactions challenge her queer identity, particularly dismissing her asexuality and pansexuality.

Kamal identifies as a cis-man and gay.

Champa identifies as a woman and prefers the term "queer" due to its expansive nature and flexibility. While she acknowledges that identifying as bisexual provides an easy label for others to recognize her, she feels that bisexuality doesn't truly capture her experiences or her understanding of her sexuality. She believes that such labels are limiting as her queer desire cannot be reduced to rigid gender and sexual binaries.

Surajmukhi, doesn't particularly value labels, and says that "sometimes I think I am hetero, sometimes I think I am queer." However, similar to other participants, he appreciates the term "queer" as an identifier.

Nargis who is a cisgender woman identifies as bisexual, and shares that labels have always been confusing to her. She initially thought being bisexual meant being attracted to both men and women, but later learnt that it could mean being attracted to multiple

genders. She ultimately chose "bisexual" as an external label, but feels that it does not fully encompass her queer desire and identity.

Chamelee identifies as a cisgender woman, queer, and pansexual.

Gudhal, who identifies as non-binary and queer, values these labels as it provides them with the ability "to be free of expectations imposed on them". Gudhal avoids terms like "gay" and "lesbian," as they feel that such labels impose restrictions on their queer identity through limiting their sexual desire and gendered presentations to rigid binary understandings of sexuality and gender.

Gudhal and Chamelee are married, but have questioned the relevance of marriage as an institution imposed on queer individuals by society through heteronormative logics. They believe that the expectation for queer relationships to fit into the traditional frame of marriage exposes societal norms that attempt to "normalize" queer relationships within South Asian culture and the broader world. This reveals how many queer relationships become homonormative by adhering to these social norms and expectations, ultimately domesticating queerness within heterosexualized frames.

Among the common themes observed in the participants' identities is the preference for "queer" as a label in seemingly contradictory ways. For example, Gulbahar and Nalini appreciate "queer" for its expansive nature. Here, viewing queer as an emancipatory identifier and gay/lesbian as a restrictive identifier, terms that have been learnt from the western world, indicates the influence of western epistemes and norms in both constricting and liberating racialized queer individuals.

However, Champa and Nargis view the label “queer” as restrictive, in part due to its western-centric nature. Champa and Nargis feel that bisexuality doesn’t fully represent their queerness, and Gudhal, doesn’t appreciate the binary labels of "gay" and "lesbian." For these participants, naming oneself through taxonomies of identification that are shaped by heteronormative logics that binarize identity erases the abundant possibilities of queer racialized identities, including South Asians.

This further demonstrates how queer South Asians are limited by systems and taxonomies of identification that were created by and for the western, white world, a world steeped in heteronormativity and white normativity. This limits the potential for queerness to be defined in ways that are authentic to racialized individuals, including South Asians. Additionally, due to the internalization of queer-phobic attitudes in South Asia, in part as a legacy of colonialism, queer South Asians are unable to employ culturally rooted terms or identifiers that might better express their queer identities. Such terms could offer more authenticity to their queerness by originating from their cultural contexts.

#### How have these individuals come to understand their queerness?

Kamal shared that he first learned about being gay from an encyclopaedia by looking for an entry on “homosexuality.” Having grown up in South Asia, where internalized homophobia and queer-phobic social attitudes are common, for a long time he believed that being gay was just a phase. In fact, he proposed to marry a girl he knew back in high school. That relationship didn’t last, and at the age of twenty-five, he moved to Canada, where he started exploring his sexuality. This experience has led to the internalization of a restrictive view of queerness for him. For example, he used to feel really triggered by effeminate queer men, indicating the impact of heteronormativity that perpetuates the

belief that femininity is "bad" for men to shape his understanding of queerness. He struggles to accept effeminacy in the queer community, reinscribing a limited view of what queerness can mean to men through the reproduction of heteronormative mechanics that uphold rigid gender and sexual binaries.

Gudhal's journey was a bit different. They started to find girls attractive at the age of fourteen, but it wasn't until their mid-twenties that they learnt about their sexual orientation and gender identity. Having learnt about their queerness in the UK, Gudhal felt pressured to be "very masc or butch to be allowed to like women". Gudhal eventually realized that these limitations didn't have to define their queer self. They began exploring their gender identity in a more fluid fashion, learning that their queer self didn't need to adhere to rigid social norms and roles.

Chamelee's journey of learning queerness is particularly fascinating. Until her mid-30s, she thought she was straight, but then a woman asked her out, and this led her to exploring her queer self. In 2008, when Chamelee was in the UK and first started exploring her queerness, she faced significant backlash from the lesbian community for having been married to a man before coming out as queer. The dismissal of her queerness due to being with a man is a social expectation of queerness that exists in line with heterosexuality, reinscribing a rigid sexual binary. Heteronormative queer culture shaped how she came to understand her queerness.

Many of the participants mentioned that they learned about queerness through western sources. In Gulbahar's case, he attributes his understanding of queerness to the consumption of western media, particularly sources with "erotic stuff." This media shaped his perception of queerness and how he should perform it. When I asked him if he believed

that white normativity shapes queerness for South Asians, he replied, “100%, queerness in India is informed by the west/white, especially because of the British and the history of our country.” Recalling Chapter 1, colonialism played a crucial role in shaping South Asia’s relationship to queerness, where, due to the internalization of queer phobic attitudes, South Asians now often find it difficult to understand their queerness through their own culture. Instead, they depend on learning about queerness through western representations, which leads to the emulation of a white, heteronormative queer self.

Similarly, Nalini remembers first learning about queerness in high school through *YouTube* videos of “white people speaking about their queerness.” Champa, recalls watching an American TV show called “The 100” at the age of fourteen, which referenced bisexuality and introduced her to the idea of exploring her own queer self. Surajmukhi started finding men attractive and desirable after being exposed to western media like WWE (wrestling competitions) and American pop culture, which has shaped his view of his queerness. Nargis also was first exposed to queerness online at the age of eight, when she watched a video of “two white girls kissing in a change room” on *Daily Motion*.

White and western notions of queerness, as portrayed in these stories, play a foundational role in both defining and shaping the queer identity of South Asians, by expanding and constraining it. Many of the participants come to understand their queerness through a white, western perspective that dismisses their culture, ultimately restricting their authentic queer selves. Moreover, South Asian communities, due to their historical relation to queerness, lack resources or safe spaces to explore their queer selves, which causes individuals to turn to western media as a source of information and exposure. This leads to queer South Asians conforming to western depictions of queerness that are tremendously

shaped by white-normative standards. This, in conjunction to other social norms, results in a narrow and restricted understanding of the queer self for South Asians.

How do participants identify with South Asian culture, and how does it influence their queerness?

Widespread queer-phobic attitudes in post-colonial South Asia has had a significant impact on queer South Asians and their capacity to express their authentic queer selves. Gulbahar says that due to the conservative nature of South Asian culture and its queer-phobic attitudes, he has had to limit his social interactions with South Asians. He avoids posting pictures with “other guys” on his social media, doesn’t have family on social platforms, and feels like he is unable to freely express his queer self to his family, because they would “always have shit to say.”

Similarly, Kamal has had to restrict his queer self due to queer-phobic attitudes in South Asian culture. He hasn't come out to many of his South Asian friends or community members, such as a close friend whom he’s known since grade three. Even when invited to social gatherings with other South Asians, Kamal feels unable to express his queer identity. He says, during a recent Onam celebration, “an aunty came up to me saying she knows a girl for me, and I was questioned about marrying her, but I denied and did not know how to navigate that situation”.

Similarly, Nalini mentions how she adapts to social expectations and navigates queer-phobia in South Asia culture by presenting herself in a way that is easiest for others to accept and understand her. When visiting family or during vacations, she hides her queer self for fear of judgement.



Champa suggests the challenges of navigating both patriarchy and queerness, especially when she returns to India. She says in such moments, it's easier to conform to patriarchal traditions than to resist them, and this can feel exhausting. Similarly, Nargis feels the pressure of South Asian culture's heteronormative ideals originating from patriarchy, as constraining to her queerness. She suggests the need to "omit a lot of things about her queer self," such as being unable to discuss her daily life, romantic relationships, or queer friends with her family. This erases her queer self within South Asian contexts.

These experiences expose how South Asian culture's heteronormative and patriarchal norms force individuals to hide their true selves, leading to the erasure and removal of their authentic queerness. Such social norms and expectations that are widely present in South Asian culture severely constrain the ability of queer South Asians to fully embrace their queer selves.

Sometimes, queer participants craved heteronormative relationships. Gulbahar says, "South Asians are pretty traditional in their outlook towards relationships", which impacts his views on queer relationships. He desires a monogamous relationship with two kids, and says, "why am I not allowed to be husband-wife?" within his queer relations. His discomfort with throuples and the want to be seen as a "straight, normal" person exposes the internalization of South Asian cultural norms. Here, the conflation of being straight with being normal, leads to queer individuals reducing their authenticity by adhering to a heteronormative and patriarchal culture to achieve that sense of "normalcy" within their queerness. In fact, Gulbahar acknowledges that these views are shaped by patriarchal structures, that limit his queer self and authenticity.

Chamelee and Gudhal struggle with heteronormative religious rituals. Chamelee says, “people have asked if I would observe Karva Chauth for Gudhal”. Karva Chauth is a South Asian tradition where the wife fasts for her husband’s long-age. The consideration of Chamelee as the wife and Gudhal as the husband, exposes the infliction of heteronormative and homonormative ideals onto their queer relationship, with the expectation to conform to a traditional “normalcy”. Gudhal and Chamelee do not practice Karva Chauth and believe that the social expectation of needing to perform it damages their queer authenticity.

Moreover, due to the strained relationship between queerness and South Asian culture, queer people might be pressured to abandon religious practices. Gudhal is deeply religious, and faces outright hostility from their South Asian community for practicing their religion. This demonstrates a challenge in being both religious and queer within South Asian culture due to queerness being seen as anti-religious. Gudhal’s experience exposes how the wide-spread presence of social norms such as patriarchy and heteronormativity prevents South Asians from expressing their spiritual practices within their queer selves.

These experiences reveal how patriarchy, heteronormativity, and queer-phobia that is shaped by South Asia’s historical relationship with queerness, imposes social norms that limit and confine the queer self for South Asians, damaging their authenticity.

How do participants situate themselves in Metro Vancouver, and how does that impact their queerness?

As mentioned, the participants in this study are representative of the queer South Asian diaspora living in Metro Vancouver. In this section, I flesh out experiences that indicate the damaging effects of whiteness and white normativity on queer South Asians,

particularly for those living in Metro Vancouver, through the experiences of the interviewees.

Gulbahar shared how he feels alienated by the queer community in Vancouver due to the wide-spread presence of whiteness within these spaces. White normativity restricts his ability to express queerness in a way that feels authentic to him. He explained that many “white gay guys/men” fail to understand that oppression is not the same for everyone.

Similarly, Champa finds it difficult to relate to white queer spaces in Vancouver, as she feels that white queer individuals privilege their own experiences over her racialized queer self. For example, when a white queer person tried to convince her to explain pronouns to her 80-year-old grandmother, which removes her culture from the conversation. White normativity within queer spaces dictates what queerness should look like, erasing the complexities of racialized queer identities and their culture from their queerness.

Nargis shares similar sentiments, suggesting that white queer individuals don’t understand the difficulty of coming out for South Asians or other racialized individuals. She says, “I cannot just cut off family members who aren’t accepting of my queerness,” as this would mean abandoning her South Asian social networks that are crucial for practicing her culture. Nargis views her South Asian heritage and social circles as essential to her queer self and authenticity. She believes that embracing the traditions of her culture with community allows her to express her queer self better. However, in queer spaces, such as those in Metro Vancouver, she feels the need to suppress her experiences as a brown woman.

Gulbahar also spoke about the body toxicity that exists within the queer community in Metro Vancouver, where toxic body standards are influenced by heteronormative ideals

that hyper-masculinize and hyper-feminize bodies. Growing up, Gulbahar was labelled as a “big kid”, which has led to a lot of pressure to conform to the “ideal” body standards within queer culture in Vancouver. This body toxicity, in combination with the social constructions of “twink-hood” and “bottom-hood” he identifies with, leads him to struggle with body image. In fact, during his first year of university in Canada in 2019, he was diagnosed with anorexia. The impact of such norms on his queer self is seen in him saying, “not only did I feel like I look really bad, but I also thought that no gay man would want me.” This exposes the damaging impacts of toxic body standards within the queer community, which are influenced by heteronormative and, in the case of Metro Vancouver, white-normative expectations. These standards further affect his queer identity and authenticity.

Similarly, Surajmukhi shared an experience, where at a bathhouse where he was the only brown person, an older white man ‘complimented’ his body saying, “you don’t look like an Indian man.” Though seemingly a compliment, Surajmukhi experienced this comment as a rejection of key part of his identity. Queer community enforces both white and hypermasculine body ideals, dismissing racialized queer identities and their unique queer bodies, ultimately limiting their queer authenticity. Surajmukhi explained that, due to this, he often feels the “need to adapt to survive, mirroring the community I am around”.

These experiences demonstrate that the white normativity and body toxicity within queer spaces in Metro Vancouver leads to queer South Asians feeling the need to conform to these norms, which ultimately damages their queer self and authenticity.

In what ways do participants adhere to social norms?

Here, we will examine how queer South Asians both conform to and resist social norms through the stories shared by the participants in this study. Here, adhering to these norms limits one's ability to express their authentic queerness, while resisting these norms provides them the capacity to better express their queer selves. How do the participants in this study conform to social norms?

Gulbahar mentions that he adheres to social norms by performing a prescribed understanding of "bottom-hood." In his first year of university, he dressed effeminately to attract the attention of "tops," choosing certain colours, pants, shoes, and avoiding having facial hair. This showcases how heteronormative expectations within queer culture of tops and bottoms through the binarization of sexual preferences impose limiting prescriptions onto his queer performance. Gulbahar explains that men would comment on how he should look to be more desirable, by saying "just shave your facial hair" or "you're great for sex, but you should have been shorter to be in a relationship with me." This leads to individuals adhering to narrow perceptions of sexuality and desirability, damagingly shaping queer individuals and their self into rigid social roles.

Kamal mentioned how body toxicity, stemming from heteronormative ideals, have shaped his queer self. Living in Canada, he has internalized a restricted understanding of body desirability, influencing his preference for certain body types to be intimate with. He says that "gay culture is a lot about your body" and suggests that, although he knows this belief is wrong, he feels the pressure to conform to it. He stated feeling the need to be "sexier" in his queer performance and body. Kamal also expressed that "at times I am jealous of my straight friends", and that "I want an ideal relationship". Here, Kamal's want

for an ideal relationship is one that replicates a straight relation, where he has a partner and children.

Champa states that her queerness is shaped by heteronormative binaries, particularly in how she views her romantic relationships. She shared that she values attention from men more than women, reflecting how the social expectation for women, especially in South Asian culture, to appeal to the male gaze, erases her queer self. Moreover, her desire to be seen as queer through social tokens like “tote bags, rings, certain clothing” exposes the demand to conform to a certain, socially-approved understanding of queerness within queer culture in Vancouver that doesn’t truly represent her authentic self.

Nargis, also, conforms to social norms by hiding parts of her identity in various settings, such as at queer gatherings, South Asian cultural events, or at work. She stated how she has internalized the belief that “in the long run, I am going to be with a man, regardless of being queer.” While she may desire a long-term queer relationship, patriarchal traditions in South Asian culture and queer-phobic attitudes have led her to feel that a lasting queer relationship is not possible. Due to this, she knows that she will have to settle with a cis-man, even if it’s not her choice. This belief then erases her queer authenticity from her sense of self.

At work, Chamelee doesn’t correct people when they assume she’s married to a man. She shared that her inability to openly express her queer relationship with her colleagues feels painful and undermines her sense of authenticity in her queerness. Chamelee also mentioned that she typically shops in the “women’s section” for feminine clothes, while her partner, Gudhal, shops in the “men’s section” for masculine clothes. Here, the two consider such an adherence to heteronormative gendered presentations of their

queer selves as damaging to their queer authenticity due to the world, in this case clothing stores, being shaped by heteronormative standards.

These instances showcase how conforming to social norms, such as those surrounding body image, relationships, or gender expression, limit the authentic queer self for South Asians. In fact, many participants in this study conform to these social norms because they believe it to be necessary to better navigate a world that is deeply ingrained in such social norms.

Gulbahar, for example, believes that internalizing norms could be helpful, as it permits an individual to better fit into traditional cultures and collectivized societies, like India. He said, “sometimes it is easier to see yourself as queer through recreating heteronormativity.” Gulbahar believes that conforming to heteronormative ideals, such as having a child and a partner, would make him more “tolerable” to others. This showcases the desire to fit into a world that operates within hegemonic social norms, even if those norms limit the authentic queer self for racialized individuals like him.

Nalini also mentions that practicing established social norms can feel helpful, stating that “when you don’t know how to do things, you can just follow a system that exists.” Due to the lack of knowledge mobilization on queerness and the privatization of sexuality in South Asian culture, many queer South Asians depend on navigating their identity by themselves. This leads to them defining their queerness from sources that are informed by social norms, even if those norms restrict their queer authenticity.

Nargis also feels that following social norms provides a sense of comfort and increases one’s chances of survival in a world shaped by these norms, such as for better job security and maintaining familial relationships.

Chamelee and Gudhal share similar feelings, stating that sometimes conforming to social norms is a manner to be safe when navigating the world. For example, when they go on vacation, they lean into heteronormative gender roles, where one partner presents themselves in a more masculine role and the other in a more feminine role. They do this for a sense of security, but it also exposes how adhering to these norms can limit their ability to truly express their authentic queer selves that exist outside such rigid binaries.

In what ways do participants resist social norms?

As mentioned before, many individuals also resist these norms to maintain a more genuine sense of self. Here, queer South Asians negotiate with society to resist these norms as a fashion to better express their queer selves.

For example, Gulbahar mentioned how he has started resisting social prescriptions to his identity as a bottom. He does not adhere to common social characteristics that are assigned to bottoms in queer culture, such as those mentioned before in his story, and has reinvented his queer self through considering himself as a “masculine bottom”. He does this to maintain better queer authenticity.

Nalini resists the imposition of traditional norms within her queer expression by moving away from conventional body desirability politics. She disagrees with the idea that outwardly appearance should have value in queer relationships. By challenging conventionally attractive bodies as desirable, she resists both the body toxicity in queer culture and the hyper-masculinization and hyper-feminization of bodies that stems from heteronormativity within South Asian culture.



Similarly, Nargis resists social norms by surrounding herself with people in the queer community, like those she has met through Sher Vancouver, who do not impose restrictive norms on her queer identity or performance. She actively distances herself from spaces and individuals that demand adherence to social norms, instead choosing to be around other racialized queer individuals and communities who understand the complexities of her identity and embrace her intersectionality. Nargis believes that by doing so, she constantly challenges the idea of a “right” or “desirable” queer self.

As a couple, Gudhal and Chamelee are great proponents for resisting social norms. The two of them have stepped away from white-centric queer spaces and traditionalist South Asian communities that enforce restrictive social norms to their queer selves. Instead, they have created their own spaces, such as through organizing queer South Asian community events, where they challenge these limiting social norms. For example, they hosted a queer Garba (an Indian dance form) night, where there were no expectations about how one should present their queer selves. They also hosted a clothing swap event where those attending were supported in rejecting heteronormative clothing expectations. These initiatives represent a double rejection of patriarchy within South Asian culture and constraining social norms within queer culture. Through these events, the two of them aim to promote a more authentic queerness, not just for themselves, but for the queer South Asian community.

### **3.4 Chapter Conclusion**

In this chapter, we explored the relationship between social norms and queer South Asians through a thematic analysis of the eight interviews that were a part of this research. Here, we applied the theoretical frameworks described in Chapter 1 to the lived experiences

of the participants, to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between queer South Asians and social norms. The chapter began by contextualizing the interviews through describing the questions asked, the participant selection process and briefly touched on the importance of balancing individual experiences when inferring broader conclusion from them. Additionally, the chapter provided a brief historical context to the specific population studied here, the queer South Asian diaspora in Canada. The chapter then analyzed the interviews through four themes to understand the participants' identities, their processes of learning about their queerness, their relationship to South Asian culture and to Metro Vancouver, as well as the manners in which they adhere to and resist social norms. Through this analysis, this chapter sheds light on the complex ways in which social norms interact with queer South Asians, to shape their queer selves and queer authenticity.

## Conclusion

This project explores the complex relationship between social norms and queer South Asians, arguing that these norms shape one's queer self, impacting their authenticity. In Chapter 1, the concept of the queer self is considered as an individual's understanding of their queer identity, where queer authenticity represents the most genuine expression of that queer self. Through analyzing the relation between the queer self and social norms, the project illustrates how social norms define the queer self, ultimately influencing how one maintains their queer authenticity.

The research in Chapter 1 further explores the concept of social norms, their hegemonic functioning, and focuses on specific norms that are vital to this study - heteronormativity, homonormativity, and white normativity. Chapter 1 then examines the hegemonic operation of these norms operate and their interconnectedness, exposing how they limit the queer self through enforcing binary gender identities, naturalizing whiteness, perpetuating body toxicity, and dichotomizing sexual preferences. The chapter also understands the ways in which these norms are maintained amongst queer South Asians due to the patriarchy within South Asian culture and the history of queerness for South Asian communities. The chapter lastly argues for the ways in which social norms can be resisted by queer individuals and queer South Asians, to negotiate their capacity to express their queer selves and authenticity.

To support this consideration, the project conducts a qualitative study through interviews, where, Chapter 2 discusses the research process, the methodological inquiry, researcher tools and guiding philosophies employed to conduct interviews, while Chapter 3

presents a thematic analysis of the eight interviews, highlighting the relationship between social norms and queer South Asians. The interview analysis examines this relationship through the themes of how participants identify and learn about their queerness, their relationship to South Asian culture and its impact on their queer selves, their relation to Metro Vancouver where they reside and its influence on their queerness, and how they both adhere to and resist social norms in shaping their queer self and authenticity. Through such an analysis, the project argues for the complex ways in which queer South Asians negotiate social norms to define and express their queer selves, further impacting their queer authenticity.

The significance of this research, as mentioned before, is seen in the need for a greater exploration of the lives of queer South Asians, a community that has not been theorized much. This project thus intends to contribute to acts of knowledge production by understanding how queer South Asians navigate their self in relation to the world and social norms around them.

Lastly, the project proposes five future directions for further research:

1. Expanding on literature through works by scholars such as Khubchandani, Butler, Tompkins, Shah, Romero, Wilson, Day, Aikau, Muñoz, Manalansan, Bey, Goldberg, Tristano Jr., Ramirez, Pierce, and Ferguson. This can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how social norms both constrain and liberate queer individuals, and their impact on the queer self and authenticity.

2. Investigating the impact of diverse geographies on the queer self and authenticity by studying various queer South Asian communities across the globe and their relationship to social norms.

3. Analyzing in greater detail how rituals of rebellion, dis-identifications, and queering the Mehfil can promote queer authenticity by resisting and negotiating social norms.

4. Conducting a larger investigation of how different racialized communities adhere to or resist social norms to explore how the queer self is shaped across various racial and ethnic groups. This can help us identify the interconnections and interdependencies among these communities to better negotiate social norms.

5. Exploring policy implications of this research by understanding how negotiations of social norms can be concertized to promote the social welfare of queer individuals.

In conclusion, I consider this project as the beginning of an epistemology and a demand of protest. It aspires to generate a world where queer racialized authenticity is not dismissed, erased, or harmed, but instead celebrated, honoured, viscerally embodied and determinedly practiced.

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