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The Karan Johar playbook: The open secret, male same-sex sexuality, and the 'big-brand' in Bollywood

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically contextualizes the open secret of Karan Johar's sexuality as a key marketable commodity in the neoliberal framework of the 'KJo' brand. It examines the cultural legibility of the open secret of his sexuality. It argues that the juxtaposition between the ubiquity of his open secret and his maintained silence on identifying his sexuality serves as an incitement that enables a study of his role in incrementally making space for a depoliticized and individualized upper-class male same-sex sexuality. By mapping the textuality of his open secret in the culture industry surrounding the Hindi film industry, this paper offers a nuanced critique of the co-option of male same-sex sexuality by Karan Johar and its deployment as a gimmick.

KEYWORDS

Bollywood; Sexuality; Celebrity; Film; LGBTQ

Introduction

One Night with Karan, a short film directed by Gauri Shinde launched on Karan Johar's Instagram page on 31 October 2019, is an advertisement produced by the creative agency Lowe Lintas for the Hindustan Unilever soup brand Knorr India.¹ The advertisement is unique as it unabashedly deploys the open secret of Johar's unnamed sexuality alongside an affirmation of his celebrity. It capitalizes on this open secret in a wide variety of cultural texts and contexts including film, TV talk shows, and in public appearances. I will demonstrate how this open secret is a key part of the 'KJo' brand (*Gopal* 17)—'a case study in diffusion' (18).² *One Night with Karan* features Johar, as himself, making soup for the TV actor Aashim Gulati at 3 am where previous Knorr adverts have exclusively featured women in this role.³ In it, Gulati's character wakes up a sleepy Johar. He is dressed sharply in a suit but suggestively drenched in the implied Mumbai rains. Having lost his house keys Gulati coyly asks Johar for hot soup. Johar's shy smiles, Gulati's suggestive pouts, and long pauses after questions such as 'you know what will make me warm?' rely on a slippage between the homosocial and the homoerotic as a key enticement and the uniqueness of the narrative.⁴

In this article, I argue that this slippage is made more familiar in South Asian public culture by the open secret of Johar's unnamed sexuality.⁵ The slippage draws on the many jokes, innuendos, and asides that Johar has consistently deployed both through the films he has directed or produced and through his public appearances on various media

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platforms.⁶ It represents the fruition of his negotiation of his unnamed sexuality in South Asian public culture. This article asks; how has this shift in South Asian public culture been made possible whereby same-sex sexuality has emerged as a new diversifiable product in media, film, and advertising? What is Johar's role in this shift and how has the open secret of his—as yet unnamed—sexuality been central in the deployment of same-sex sexuality for profitability?

I analyze Johar's influence on South Asian public culture to argue that it is the mobilization of the open secret of his sexuality that has enabled a neoliberal logic of deploying same-sex sexuality as a marketable commodity centred on individual exceptionalism.⁷ I argue that his mediation of his unnamed sexuality functions as a unique selling point of the 'KJo' brand that works towards a relative destigmatization of same-sex sexuality in South Asian public culture. This 'KJo' brand is immensely diversifiable and can be understood to include his style of film making (see [Gopal; Johar and Saxena](#) 104), his 'maximalist' sense of fashion ([S. Gandhi](#)), alongside his public appearances on TV talk shows, radio, reality competitions and shows, and persona curated on his social media accounts.⁸ However, I argue that a key unifying aspect of this brand is 'commercial success' ([Johar and Saxena](#) 141) and profitability. Within this context, I focus on the centrality of the open secret of his sexuality and its importance in inflecting the textuality of the representation of male same-sex sexuality in terms of images on screen, identities (named and unnamed), and its symbolic ties to a depoliticized neoliberal subjectivity shaping his own celebrity persona. I read the contrary logic of this open secret by analyzing the 'KJo' brand and films within the context of the role of celebrity in informing, specifically what Richard Dyer calls, the 'production/consumption dialectic' ([Dyer](#) 19).⁹ This dialectic in relation to celebrity offers a way to think of stars as 'giving expression to variously conceptualized inner wants on the part of the mass of the people' (18) and that further the expression of this choice is crucially 'shaped by the particular ideological formations of their situation in society' (19).¹⁰

Dyer's formulation is essential to help frame the current moment in Hindi cinema. That of the producer understanding and remaining in sync with the consumer to deliver content that is marketable, new, and yet is also ambivalent on taking a stand in relation to same-sex sexuality. Karan Johar himself attests to remaining relevant in his biography *An Unsuitable Boy* ([Johar and Saxena](#)) (henceforth *Unsuitable*). He says that it is crucial for him to remain 'relevant' particularly '...to the youth' (124), but also for 'a selfish reason [which is]...to win critical acclaim' (123) as he explains in relation to *My Name is Khan* which I understand to be applicable to his other films 'based on a social cause' (122), and to rely on his 'instinct' (119) as a filmmaker. As I will demonstrate, the instinct indicates an acute sense of what films to finance and especially how to position and market same-sex sexuality to the audience as a 'gimmick' (116); the need to remain relevant indicates Johar's close attention to media consumption online, particularly on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram in relation to same-sex sexuality (124, 171–175).¹¹ It is therefore in recognition of this relationship between consumption and production that I demonstrate the centrality of Johar's use of the open secret to depoliticize and deploy same-sex sexuality for profitability. It offers an understanding of the navigation of the shift in relation to representation of male same-sex sexuality within film and content production in Mumbai post the liberalization of the Indian economy.

The production/consumption dialectic in relation to celebrity therefore, in my understanding of Dyer's articulation, is to situate film and media content production as a means to understand how the competition for unique diversifiable content uses same-sex sexuality as a gimmick—in a neoliberal and gentrified film-market—to produce new unique content by tapping into the growing consumption of images of LGBTQ+ people without disturbing the status quo. That is, an ideological position that—as Lisa Duggan (2004), and Jasbir Puar (2006, 2007) in US-based contexts have pointed out—deploys representation of male same-sex sexuality for purposes that reflect complicity, consumption, and profitability.

In the absence of Johar's own public declaration for the rationale behind his push for greater visibility of same-sex sexuality across various media, this article demonstrates the relationship between the use of the open secret in relation to representation of same-sex sexuality in film and media coming from Dharma Productions, Johar's own celebrity status predicated on successfully using this open secret as a marketing device, and the ideological position this secrecy permits by depoliticizing same-sex sexuality from wider discourses and movements against hegemonic structures of power.¹² Together, I argue, this centers him in the work to make an unnamed male same-sex sexuality palatable to a wide consumer base, gentrifying homophobia, and ensuring its availability as a diversifiable element for profit-based filmmaking while attempting to strike a balance between the continued social opprobrium of same-sex sexuality and catering to elite and diasporic markets.¹³

This article aims to serve three key purposes. One, contextualize the textuality of the representation of male same-sex sexuality in the 'KJo' brand.¹⁴ Two, critique the deployment of same-sex sexuality within South Asian public culture that is increasingly configuring male same-sex sexuality as depoliticized and easy to co-opt within hegemonic narrative structures of the family (Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film*) to create a differentiated product. Three, showing how this limited, but depoliticized, transformation of male same-sex sexuality follows a trajectory of positive assimilationist incremental change that trades on Johar's own social capital given the contextually specific limitations on gay rights and continued social stigma in India.¹⁵ I argue that Johar's unstated politics in this regard, 'what [he] stand[s] for' ("Karan Johar – India's Most Desirable"), inform the 'KJo' brand (Gopal 16–18) and is closely tied to the gentrification of Hindi cinema (Ganti 4). This brand profits from and perpetuates the instrumentalization of depoliticized and consumerist representation of male same-sex sexuality as a differentiated product but is also deeply ambivalent about committing to a cause that might damage the brand.¹⁶

The cultural texts I draw on in order to trace the working of this open secret examine two key appearances on TV talks shows, his role influencing the wider culture industry through advertisements and YouTube only content, as well as the transformation in the portrayal of homophobia by chronologically analyzing homophobia and class in three key films—*Kal Ho Naa Ho* (henceforth *KHNH*), *Dostana*, and *Student of the Year* (henceforth *SOTY*), ending on a close reading of the understated sexuality of Kayoze Irani's character, Sudo, in *SOTY*. I juxtapose my reading of these texts with information on production context discussed in Johar's biography *An Unsuitable Boy* (Johar and Saxena) to demonstrate the centrality of the open secret and his role in the marketization of same-sex sexuality, and especially in the absence of his explication of his sexuality.¹⁷

This biography not only expands on his role in shaping representation of same-sex sexuality in the ‘KJo’ films but also outlines the relationship of his unnamed sexuality to the ‘KJo’ brand, his public persona, which he terms a ‘big-brand off-shoot’ (*Unsuitable* 70).¹⁸ Here I situate my readings of the open secret in a queer positionality that critiques the neoliberal logic whereby male same-sex sexuality and its related sub-culture are deployed in the interest of profit and individualized consumption.¹⁹

‘[A] big-brand offshoot’: The ‘KJo’ brand, the open secret, and the politics of refusal

On more than one occasion, the director-producer Karan Johar has refused naming his sexual orientation. In his biography, *Unsuitable*, he says: ‘[e]verybody knows what my sexual orientation is [and I]. . . will not say the three words that possibly everybody knows about me’ (173). Similar refusals are expressed in his appearance in an episode of the TV talk show *Rendezvous with Simi Garewal* (‘Kajol & Karan Johar’) (henceforth ‘*Rendezvous-KK*’).²⁰ In both instances, he invokes his right to privacy. However, in his biography he also raises the question of the rumours about his sexuality.²¹ One of his defences to these questions is helpful in understanding his politics in deploying the open secret of his sexuality. He says: ‘I know I am the butt of many jokes, pun intended. I know how my sexuality is discussed. I have become. . . the poster boy of homosexuality in this country’ (*ibid*). I argue that this correlation between homosexuality and the perpetuation of these rumours is key to the ‘KJo’ brand as it serves as a unique enticement in South Asian public culture. His refusal to name his sexuality, alongside its circulation as an open secret, functions as unique currency in the celebrity and star circuit.

Sangita Gopal mentions the prevalence of the ‘KJo’ brand, calling it ‘a case study in diffusion’ (18). Johar elaborates on this, he says ‘[f]or a film director to be articulate and communicative was a new-age phenomenon. . . I realize that it’s a big-brand offshoot’ (Johar and Saxena 70). I argue that this offshoot brand is made possible by the open secret of Johar’s unnamed sexuality. It offers his sexuality as a specific unique selling point not accessed by other film industry stars or directors and is predicated on the culturally readable open secret of his sexuality.²² He highlights the uniqueness of his position; he says that this set a ‘precedent for things to come. I brought the director out of the closet, pun not intended’ (*ibid*). However, I stress, that this pun is precisely the point. The centrality and role of the closet in the allure of this unique positionality is also reinforced by the choice of title for his biography. Positioned as the inverse of Vikram Seth’s novel *A Suitable Boy*—focusing on Lata Mehra’s search for a suitable husband, the plot of the novel locates the ideal marriageable man as a nouveau-riche middle-class man who embodies its entrepreneurial spirit—the word ‘unsuitable’ in the title of Johar’s biography then suggests not just his sexual incompatibility with a woman and emphasises the narrative of his entrepreneurial work, but also deploys a necessary knowledge of Seth’s novel as a clever disguise. Therefore, as the title for his biography, *An Unsuitable Boy* is not just itself a marketing device, it also centers the open secret of his unnamed sexuality in guiding his entire journey thus far. It offers an exemplar par excellence of the need to locate the open secret as a key marketing device of the ‘KJo’ brand.

The appeal of this open secret can be understood by examining its initial public appearance on ‘*Rendezvous-KK*’. In this episode from 2001, Garewal is in conversation

with very close ‘best-friends’ (*ibid*) Kajol and Johar (but see [Johar and Saxena 157](#)). Her show, interviewing ‘eminent and prominent Hindi film stars’ ([Singh, ‘Transnational Screen Navigations’ 261](#)) and catering to ‘elite Indian audiences’ (“[Rendezvous-KK](#)”) employs an intimate style of interviewing and falls within the larger genre of the day-time celebrity chat shows elsewhere ([Timberg and Erler](#)). This episode is described as a ‘RIOT’ on her website and YouTube channel especially because of the uncontrollable laughter ending the episode. In it Johar makes culturally readable references to imitating and dancing well like Madhuri Dixit and Sridevi, both Hindi cinema divas idolised in non-heterosexual subcultures in South Asia.²³ Furthermore, it is telling that in response to Garewal’s directive to Johar, saying ‘...now I think it’s time you have a wife’, Kajol, unprompted, immediately launches into a defence. She says, ‘I don’t want you to get married Karu. . .’ (a nickname she uses to refer to him) to which he adds ‘there you go. . . Kajol says she’ll hate my wife, so I don’t know’. Kajol’s response and the following dialogue is a key moment on Indian television as she indicates an unquestioned acceptance of the possibility of a male partner for him. She says ‘I think it will depend on who your wife is really, if you get one [fictitious] guy from Ghatkopar then we’ll have to worry’ to which his response is ‘no I don’t think I want to marry anybody from Ghatkopar’—a suburb in Mumbai—refuting the location for its class implications rather than the gender of the partner. They go on to mock astrologers who predicted Johar’s hypothetical wife will be ‘North Indian’, laugh off his parents’ encounters with this hypothetical wife. However, Kajol ends by saying, presciently, ‘there’s always in-vitro fertilization and surrogate motherhood’ before breaking down into uncontrollable laughter (*ibid*). All of this leaves Simi Garewal looking very confused and on the outside of their jokes.

The failure to react to the gender of the hypothetical partner (‘guy from Ghatkopar’) might be passed off as an inconsequential aside; however, I see it as a unique readable moment that together with the riotous laughter ending the episode marks the dual consciousness at play and the titillation offered by this early appearance of the open secret. I read this moment as a breakdown of the dual consciousness that characterises ‘all talk worlds of private conversations made public’ ([Timberg and Erler 15](#)). Here the double address of the ‘talk world’—defined as the intersection of the small intimate group simultaneously speaking to each other as well as a clearly defined public as a ‘collective audience’ (*ibid*)—reconfigures the public and the private as Kajol and Johar share knowledge not public to Garewal. Other talk worlds configure the film industry persona, both host and guests, on screen as part of the intimate private into which a collective audience is being invited through the broadcast. However, the knowledge of Johar’s sexuality disrupts this standard configuration. Here he and Kajol appear to be in the know about his unnamed sexuality that Garewal does not seem to share.

Furthermore, this knowledge fragments both the double address and the collective audience. Garewal—with her repeated mention of his hypothetical marriage and wife—and the larger film industry, appear as external to, and confused by, the secret in comparison to Kajol and Johar who are reconstituted as the intimate address within the show. More importantly, the implied collective audience is further fragmented. Those able to read the cultural codes signalled by earlier references to Madhuri and Sridevi alongside the other ones, including the sub-text of the ostensibly gay-best friend dynamics between Kajol and Johar, are interpellated within the secret of the sub-text.²⁴ Those interpellated can understand and share in the giddy pleasure of this oblique

coming-out of an Indian celebrity on Indian television whilst also enjoying the exclusivity of the secrecy. It is this pleasure that is activated by the constant re-deployment of the open secret that continues to inform its importance in the ‘KJo’ brand. Moreover, as I will demonstrate, the pleasure inflected by the coming-out, alongside the sub-culture references increasingly made legible through the ‘KJo’ brand and films, drive the profitability of using male same-sex sexuality in this way. That is, without reference to the larger movement and struggle for decriminalization and legibility ongoing since the early 1990s.²⁵

Given this oblique coming-out and the legible sub-cultural references, it is worth asking again not why Johar refuses to come-out publicly, as several activists and filmmakers in India have done (Puranik; Kavi; F. Gandhi; Asrani), but rather what is achieved by his refusal to come-out? The answer to this question lies in the neoliberal logic of mobilising same-sex sexuality as a marketable commodity centred on individual exceptionalism in the ‘KJo’ brand. Drawing on Barthes’ notion of ex-nomination (Barthes and Lavers 141), I suggest that the increasing ubiquity of this marketable but depoliticized sexuality is rooted in the emergence of the new middle classes—‘a post feudal group, which has wide economic opportunities’ (Dwyer, *All You Want Is Money, All You Need Is Love* 59). The specific outlines of this politics are then gleaned on comparing Johar’s earlier appearance in 2001 (*Rendezvous-KK*) with his 2011 solo appearance on Garewal’s next talk show titled *Simi Selects – India’s Most Desirable* (“Karan Johar – India’s Most Desirable”) (henceforth ‘*Simi Selects-KJo*’). Here the host seems to be brought into the know. Unlike their previous interaction this one seems to have a more clearly constructed pre-agreed narrative regarding his sexuality.²⁶ This agreement seems indicated by Garewal’s use of the gender-neutral term ‘partner’ instead of her previous repeated references to a hypothetical wife. Johar also seems to deploy a standardized narrative that reappears repeatedly as a response to the question of his sexuality. Here he reiterates his choice and privacy in the matter, an argument he has upheld in several other contexts including in his biography. However, in this response, Johar, in addition to using gender-neutral terms, deploys a crucial additional refusal to, as Garewal exhorts, ‘come-out and clear it out’ (*ibid*). He says:

... Why should I talk about my personal life, nobody knows what I stand for, in terms of my personal life and I’d like to keep it that way (*ibid*).

This position of what he does actually stand for is clarified in his biography. He says ‘the only thing I plan for is commercial success’ (141). Furthermore, that unlike other politically minded directors and film industry luminaries he is ‘not an immensely politically motivated person’ (142). Together the exclusive focus on commercial success without a nuanced consideration for the politics of representation (142) underlines a neoliberal film-making agenda responding to the changing conditions of the Indian economy and the Hindi film industry.

This position, in the case of Johar’s use of his unnamed sexuality specifically, is related to his own rise to stardom at the juncture of the political realignment of the elites and middle classes in India in the 1980s and 90s. Rachel Dwyer is instructive on both counts. In thinking about the ‘KJo’ brand in this context, she focuses on the star as a text whose intertextual roles spills over into wider media texts (“A Star Is Born” 96) and the culture industry (Prasad, “Surviving Bollywood”; Rajadhyaksha). In the case of the ‘KJo’ brand

the deployment of the open secret includes countless jokes and innuendos on his TV talk show, *Koffee with Karan* (2004–2018).²⁷ In these, and in his other appearances ranging from advertisements to radio and TV shows, and with smaller YouTube-only production houses (discussed next), he capitalises on the open secret. Therefore, to further examine the functioning of this open secret, I engage with the question of Johar's celebrity, and position as a director and producer within the wider cultural industry. I then consider the gentrification of homophobia in tandem with the representation of male same-sex sexuality in select 'KJo' films. These latter when studied linearly demonstrate an important trajectory that has been instrumental in destigmatizing homophobia in South Asian public culture.

Karan Johar: Negotiating stardom and sexuality

Johar's stardom functions in a different vein from superstars such as Shah Rukh Khan who started their careers as actors (Dudrah et al.) and is different from other directors like Aditya Chopra (Dwyer, *Yash Chopra*) who keep a low profile in the media. Given his media presence, box office successes, and position as a director/producer, I contextualize the question of the politics of his refusal through the ideological work permitted by his refusal to 'come-out'. Here I draw on Richard Dyer, Rachel Dwyer, and Tejaswini Ganti in contextualizing his politics of refusal on two levels. One raises the question of ideologies and star phenomenon. The other raises the question of the open secret as a negotiated position of stardom within the cultural codes at play in the South Asian context where the 'family [is placed] before the individual' (Dwyer, "A Star Is Born" 98).

Johar's role as a director/producer sets him apart from actors as stars and his influence over representation of same-sex sexuality through Dharma Productions, his company. Not only does he enjoy a privileged position in relation to representation, but also even more so through the 'organisation of the motion picture industry around commodity production and...control over production' (Dyer 8). That is, Johar, through Dharma Productions, has been responsible for launching various new-comers to the industry, positioning and marketing film releases, while also determining the kinds of films to invest in, the directors responsible for various Dharma films, and the films he himself directs. What then are the ideological questions that underscore Johar's role within the Hindi film industry and the wider cultural industry around it?

Drawing on Dyer on the relationship between 'stars and specific instabilities, ambiguities and contradictions [in] culture' (31) I situate Johar's deployment of the open secret of male same-sex sexuality alongside two important and significant changes and instabilities in India. The first, and well documented, is the contrary impact liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s had on the Hindi film industry (see Ganti; Dwyer, *All You Want Is Money, All You Need Is Love*). The granting of industry status enabled access to regularized finance and thereby rapid growth alongside wooing back Indian and diasporic middle-class viewers through burgeoning multiplexes. Ganti has called this the gentrification of Hindi cinema which also results in greater diversity of content in a '...bid to create differentiated product' ("The Meanings of 'Bollywood'" 6).²⁸ Dwyer notes that this entire process marks the emergence of new post feudal and entrepreneurial middle classes, whose increasing capital, cultural and economic, indicates a shift in alignment from the ideals of the earlier professional middle classes to a populist model

reclaiming ‘Hindu identity with pride’ (76), modernity, and family values (84).²⁹ Resultantly, an upper-class and upper-caste Hindu emerges as a norm located on a continuum with a neoliberal cosmopolitan citizen subjectivity focused on individuality and consumption. In parallel, the movement challenging Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code also catapulted the question of same-sex sexuality into public visibility, making it an increasingly topical theme for the film industry. Consequently, enabling the emergence of a depoliticized gay consumer (see [Berlant and Warner](#); [Duggan](#)). In this context, the second change of Johar taking over Dharma Productions in 2004 is critical. Not only did it enable the company to also benefit from the gentrification of Hindi cinema but also gave him the ‘freedom’ to develop themes his father would not ‘allow’ ([Johar and Saxena](#) 103). Then along with catering to the consumer who increasingly watches film and media in the luxury of expensive multiplexes, or in private homes ([Ganti](#)) and on hand-held devices ([Dasgupta](#) 21–25) these considerations are crucial in charting the changing deployment of male same-sex sexuality on screen and underscore Johar’s role in negotiating and capitalizing on them.

Next, I discuss advertisements like *One Night with Karan* that evidence the increasing deployment of a neoliberal and depoliticized male same-sex sexuality within the context of gentrification of Hindi cinema and symbiotic cultural industry. Thereafter, I extend Gopal’s argument and contextualize and read a series of ‘KJo’ films to analyse the gentrification of homophobia and the depoliticization of same-sex sexuality.

Advertisements and the gentrification of homophobia

Advertisements (2001 Rajgopal; [Vanita](#)), brand-placements within Bollywood films ([Kapur](#); [Sen](#)), and film and media content produced by several smaller production companies in a symbiotic relationship with the Hindi film industry are important examples to understand the impact of gentrification on the representation of same-sex sexuality and homophobia. Vying for attention in the growing consumption of unique online content film production companies are increasingly adopting a liberal credo whereby popular feminism, and LGBT inclusion, are deployed to diversify their offering and develop depoliticized sexuality as a unique product appealing to an emergent neoliberal cosmopolitan citizen subjectivity.³⁰

Gauri Shinde’s *One Night with Karan* is one such example, deploying Johar’s unnamed sexuality as a marketing device.³¹ This advertisement highlights individuality particularly through the careful styling of both Johar and Gulati. Like other advertisements it separates same-sex sexuality from the larger struggle for rights and roots them in benign images of tradition and family. Knorr soup’s branding has been steeped in care work performed by women within the household with women actors and TV celebrities as brand ambassadors. Therefore, Johar’s casting in the Knorr advertisement is not radical. It replaces women performing care work, with a man who has nudged public culture to make space for a depoliticized upper-class ostensibly same-sex desiring but unnamed sexuality. Instead of leading meaningful change in the politics of representation by challenging the gender binary, it capitalises on extant activist struggles. Similar examples can be seen in other advertisement campaigns such as the #BoldisBeautiful campaign by the Anouk Brand of Myntra, an Indian fashion e-company,³² which depicts two women as a Hindu-Muslim couple living in Bangalore meeting one of their parents for the first

time (see Luther). It ignores the structural and material challenges women face in India, including women who desire the same-sex (see films by Majumder; Manimekalai). Instead, such adverts highlights individual achievements and preferences of the two women, which while touching and romanticised for the purpose of the advertisement, circumvent their political struggles and capitalizes on diversity tokenism.

Similarly, many smaller production houses—producing content for YouTube and social media such as Nazar Battu (*Sasuraal Gaynda Fool Feat. Babuji Alok Nath*) and the production company All India Bakchod (henceforth AIB)—benefit from their symbiotic relationship with Bollywood and capitalize on the textuality of same-sex sexuality in creating a unique diversified product focused on individualized struggles. The AIB Roast relies on the open secret of Johar’s sexuality billed as the first live roast in the Hindi film industry.³³ Similarly, Nazar Battu’s video *Sasuraal Gaynda Fool* shows two men bringing their parents together to discuss their own arranged marriage to each other.³⁴ It riffs on the Hindi film actor Alok Nath’s typecasting in several films as the epitome of benevolent liberal Hindu patriarchy, especially in the Bollywood blockbuster *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun?* (Who Am I To You?) (Barjatya). In this video, the struggle of these two men lies in navigating the homophobic but benevolent patriarchies in abeyance of questions regarding decriminalization of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Neither the video, nor the other content by Nazar Battu, Anouk, or the others address the then on-going struggle against Section 377.

However, this kind of deployment of depoliticized same-sex sexuality has been made possible in South Asian public culture by the work of the ‘KJo’ brand, including the ‘KJo’ film. Following Schoonover and Galt’s argument that ‘[As] a [global] mass-medium . . . render[ing] same-sex desire visible in public, cinema offers a particularly rich staging ground for new models of visual pleasure that exploit the popular and reformulate its constituencies’ (168), I turn to a closer examination of the work in depoliticizing male same-sex sexuality in the popular by the ‘KJo’ films. Like the open secret, key to the ‘KJo’ brand and ever present in Johar’s public appearances, a series of ‘KJo’ films contribute to the gentrification of homophobia and the depoliticization of same-sex sexuality in Bollywood and the broader cultural industry. Herein the gentrification of homophobia is closely tied to the disappearance of the working-classes from the diegetic space to be increasingly replaced by upwardly aspirant lower-middle classes. Moreover, the representation of the lower-classes, on the one hand, and the depoliticized representation of same-sex sexuality, on the other, are tied to the circumscription of sex, love, and romance in the context of the traditional family, and the creation of an image of wealth, rooted in international travel, transnational brand consumption, and lavish lifestyles (Gopal 16; Dwyer, *All You Want Is Money, All You Need Is Love* 96, 100; Rao 2020, 148).³⁵

The disappearance and replacement of the working classes plays a key role in the transformation of the representation of male same-sex sexuality in the ‘KJo’ films. Here I read *KHNH*, *Dostana*, and *SOTY* for their engagement with homophobia to understand the process whereby it is gentrified and seen as uncool. In these films, homophobia is made fun of and displaced, represented as emerging from the lower-middle and working-class characters contrary to earlier representation in slapstick comedy cross-dressing routines by actors such as Johnny Lever, Govinda, or Anupam Kher.³⁶ This gentrification of homophobia is evident in the work done by the characters of Kanta-ben, Mrs. Acharya, and Jeet Khurana in *KHNH*, *Dostana*, and *SOTY* respectively. *KHNH* revolves around

a homosocial triangle between Rohit, Naina, and Aman played by actors Saif Ali Khan, Preity Zinta, and Shah Rukh Khan, respectively, and is set in Manhattan.³⁷ Kanta-ben—who does Rohit’s cleaning, cooking, and housekeeping—in *KHNH* becomes the conduit for homophobic hilarity as she melodramatically trembles or faints at displays of erotic play-acting between Rohit and Aman.³⁸

These scenes interpellate audiences through a logic like that of the open secret. In these scenes, Kanta-ben invariably stumbles onto a tableau staged to exclude her point-of-view. The staging is used to establish prior context, usually over phone calls or messages to Naina, for the supposedly compromising positions Kanta-ben then finds Aman and Rohit in. The omniscient camera allows audiences to share in Aman’s perspective from which Kanta-ben is excluded. They are then free to laugh at her misinterpretation of it secure in the knowledge of Naina’s centrality to Aman and Rohit’s supposedly compromising positions.³⁹ The hilarity that ensues is then not necessarily all at the expense of the homoeroticism on screen but rather possibly also at Kanta-ben’s reactions to it because of the implicit heterosexuality of the context. This heterosexuality, in return, functions as the open secret for the tableau which allows for an identification with Aman and diffuses the possibility of homophobia. After the first instance, this becomes a predictable trope and Kanta-ben’s character is not allowed to develop much of an understanding of the mistaken homoeroticism. Instead, the trope works to exclude her from the collective audience in on the open secret of Aman and Rohit’s erotic play-acting.

However, in an important contrast between the classes this tableau staging is also used in *Dostana*.⁴⁰ This film too revolves around a homosocial triangle involving Sam, Kunal, and Neha, played by actors Abhishek Bachchan, John Abraham, and Preity Zinta respectively. Sam and Kunal pretend to be a couple for immigration and renting advantages in Miami but are attracted to their landlord/housemate Neha. Here the logic of the open secret, of Sam and Kunal’s heterosexuality, is used to exclude for a limited time, Neha and the character of Mrs. Acharya, played by Kirron Kher. Mrs. Acharya, Sam’s traditional and wealthy diasporic South Asian mother, drops everything in her home in London to fly to Miami when she accidentally receives her son’s same-sex civil partnership documentation by post. However, unlike Kanta-ben, Mrs. Acharya and Neha are both allowed to come to terms with this hypothetical same-sex sexuality before they each discover that it was a ruse. Mrs. Acharya, like Kanta-ben, also displays melodramatic excesses; however, unlike Kanta-ben’s flat-character, the diegetic space allows Mrs. Acharya’s character some growth and development in coming to accept this hypothetical same-sex sexuality through an emotional appeal to her maternal side. The class differential is important here. Mrs. Acharya is given a reason—tradition and culture—for her melodramatic excesses and is allowed to develop and accept this sexuality, while Kanta-ben remains a flat-character. No rationality is offered for the latter’s disgust/fear of same-sex sexuality other than a default—her working-class background.

In *SOTY* the difference in being allowed to develop an understanding towards same-sex sexuality is part of the displacement of homophobia and its gentrification and is set up as a question of class. This difference is used against the character of Jeet Khurana, played by Sahil Anand. Jeet, a student at St. Teresa’s competing for the titular competition, is repeatedly emphasised as lower middle-class. He is seen buying a ‘cheap, very cheap’ airline ticket, is told by his parents to hold on to fellow student and industrialist

heir-apparent Rohan Nanda's coattails, and appears without the branded products that the upper-class characters use. He is also the only character in the film to cast directly stated aspersions as to the Dean's sexuality. Jeet, one of the multiple narrators in the film, introduces the Dean, Yogi (played by Rishi Kapoor), through a euphemism for anal sex, saying: 'Aapne dean, *joh aage nahi peeche ka raasta pakadte hai*' ('Our Dean, one who prefers the back-door instead of the front'). This explanation is both indicative of gossip and is a gentrified reference to the common-place Hindi homophobic slur *gaandu*, meaning one who enjoys anal sex. Here a direct gaze is used to correct Jeet's reference to the rumours of Yogi's unnamed sexuality. This direct gaze is deployed by Sudo, a key narrator of the film and the other character who is 'like' the Dean. Sudo abruptly corrects Jeet. Through the direct gaze he interpellates the audience into the dismissal of the casual gossip and the oblique to the homophobic slur by saying '*woh dean hai taxi nahi*' (he's a Dean not a taxi). This also functions to draw the audience into an upper-class intimate private world where same-sex sexuality is implicitly acceptable.

The chronological order of these films, their marketing, and publicity context also contextualises the gradual shift in the representation homophobia in the 'KJo' films. The shift from Kanta-ben to Mrs. Acharya's acceptance of hypothetical male same-sex sexuality also works as a litmus test in the box-office. Both films did reasonably well with *KHNNH* raking in over 4 billion USD worldwide and *Dostana* nearly 7 billion USD in their first weeks as per the website Box Office India. Simultaneously, Johar informally made possible the distribution in 2005 of the acclaimed film *My Brother...Nikhil* (Onir) through Yash Raj Films but keeping the box office in mind did not position it as a 'gay' or HIV/AIDS film (Ramesh 161–62). These factors, including *My Brother...Nikhil*'s critical acclaim alongside box-office viability, might have set the stage for the nuanced portrayal of same-sex sexuality offered in Johar's unapologetic short film dealing with closeted male homosexuality, *Ajeeb Daastan Hai Yeh* in *Bombay Talkies*, released in 2013 a year after *Dostana*.

These experiments in balancing male same-sex sexuality alongside the considerations of commercial cinema, cultural values of the new middle-classes, audience perception, I suggest, permits an incremental shift in representation. Johar has described this as '... us[ing] pop culture to make people aware about homosexuality'.⁴¹ Therefore, subsequent films are able to not just portray characters with unnamed male same-sex sexuality, but also locate them in Indian contexts. Thus, *SOTY*'s fictional St. Teresa's appears to be set in India, *Kapoor & Sons* is set in Coonoor in Tamil Nadu, *Dear Zindagi* is set in Mumbai (and Goa) and center the new middle and upper-classes. Moreover, homophobia does not seem to make an appearance in the trivialised ways after *Dostana* in these films, but rather, as in *Kapoor & Sons*, is negotiated in a more complex manner, albeit within the space of the family as the setting for the mother–son intergenerational conflict. Taken together these films are reliant on the unique marketability of a destigmatized male same-sex sexuality and make such a destigmatized sexuality marketable in South Asian public culture, albeit replete with neoliberal characteristics centering the individual.⁴²

In this context of middle-class cultural values, audiences, and centering a normative neoliberal individual, the open secret is a versatile tool and a unique marketable commodity of the 'KJo' brand. Johar's various public appearances as a star director/producer on a range of media programmes, including those produced by him, are immensely successful because of the way in which the open secret perpetuates a pleasure predicated

on knowledge of the secret and permits the emergence of a depoliticized and destigmatized male same-sex sexuality. This deployment capitalizes on the neoliberal transformations within the socio-political climate of India and the Hindi film industry without crucially upsetting the framework of the family melodrama and the cultural nationalist formulation of tradition and culture. Rather, as I have argued with the chronology, it demonstrates a gentle nudging of south Asian public culture to make space for a neoliberal male same-sex sexuality (see also 2014 95).

In the remainder of this article, I examine the representation of male same-sex sexuality in *SOTY* in conversation with Johar's biography, and statements by him and other stars in the media, to situate a critical shift in the representation of unnamed male same-sex sexuality in the 'KJo' films. I argue that Johar's politics of refusal offers an articulate director/producer not just as 'somebody who could make good copy' (Johar and Saxena 70) but also as someone who is able to demonstrate both through the 'KJo' films and the 'KJo' brand that male same-sex sexuality is not threatening to the dominant order of tradition and culture. In close reading *SOTY* for the relevance of Yogi and the character of Sudo, I rely on Gopal's explication of the key tenants of the 'KJo' film and locate the film in the wider 'KJo' inflected marketability of same-sex sexuality.

Student of the Year

Set in a fictional boarding high school called St. Teresa's the film *SOTY* revolves around the students' lives as they compete for an annual competition called 'Student of the Year'. Narrated through a series of flashbacks and voice-overs, the present-time of the film gathers an old batch of St. Teresa's graduates at a hospital where the school's Dean, Yogi, played by the actor Rishi Kapoor, is critically hospitalized. They learn that his hospitalization is due, in part, to the events leading up to and the award ceremony of their batch's 'Student of the Year' competition. Yogi is portrayed as unmarried, campy, and described by Kapoor as 'soft on the [school's] coach' but not 'gay' (Kotwani). Moreover, Kapoor, in describing his acting process in this instance, says he was a 'copycat actor' in playing Yogi. He said '[w]hile working in the film, I'd tell Karan [Johar], "*tum karke dikhao* (you do it and show me) and I'll copy you"' (Kotwani). Implicating Johar's own contribution to the character of Yogi. Additionally, Yogi's sexuality functions as an open secret that the diegesis exploits for comic relief though his daydreams for the coach, the non-diegetic music introducing Yogi, and his melodramatic arch-rivalries.

SOTY is a crucial film in the representation of same-sex sexuality as it is located at the juncture of several ambivalences. On the one hand are the quintessential features of the 'KJo' film (Gopal) that Johar summarizes as 'the big songs, the big sets, the largeness' (104) and those Gopal outlines—intergenerational conflict, weakened patriarchal authority, centrality of the family as a staging ground, and an absent wider society. On the other is balancing the questions of profitability, male same-sex sexuality, and coolness which Johar describes balancing 'creativity', 'commerce', and the 'audience' or the omnipresent consumer to whom he must always appear 'relevant' (Johar and Saxena 122).

SOTY features an intergenerational conflict between Yogi and Sudo whose alternative sexuality is diegetically foregrounded. It dispenses with the absolutism of the patriarch (the character of Mr. Nanda) as the young heroes, Rohan Nanda and Abhimanyu, played by new 'talent' (124) Varun Dhawan and Sidharth Malhotra attempt to chart their careers

as self-made men. It absents larger society through the setting within St. Teresa's, a fictional Riverdale High reboot of the summer-camp in *KKHH* with a reversal of the 'Archie and the two girls' (57) plot. The staging ground of the family is revamped to imply a network of ambivalent friendships emerging from that one Student of the Year competition which broke Yogi.

The intergenerational conflict staged between Sudo and Yogi is important to the destigmatization of same-sex sexuality yet is peripheral to the plot. Unlike earlier iterations of 'hypothetical queerness' in *KHNH* and *Dostana* (see Gehlawat, 2014), both Yogi and Sudo's sexualities can be mapped as unnamed upper-class male same-sex sexuality. Rishi Kapoor disavows the word 'gay' in discussing the character of Yogi saying 'I wouldn't say he's gay. . .not the correct gender orientation. He's not married, is soft on the PT coach. . .It is a very sensitive approach with Karan and my sensibilities and aesthetics' (Kotwani)(sic). The film also does not use the word gay, Sudo only uses the phrase—'*hum jaise logon*' (people like us) —by way of an identification.⁴³ However, this intergenerational conflict appears as a non-sequitur as the plot thus far is driven by another homosocial triangle, that between the characters of Varun Dhawan, Alia Bhatt, and Sidharth Malhotra. Yogi and Sudo's conflict is triggered by the introduction of Sudo's sudden choice of a male dance partner to compete in the dance challenge in the competition, rupturing normative assumptions. This moment is implied as the reason for his defeat in the competition but is not foregrounded or highlighted. Instead, it is after losing the dance challenge that a distraught and angry Sudo confronts Yogi at the Awards Ceremony. Here he alludes to his commonality with Yogi by referring to them both as 'people like us'. In his angry outburst Sudo says: '. . .and who cares *ki hum jaise logon ko partner nahi milte hain*, Dean' (. . .and who cares that people like us can't find partners, Dean). However, this moment is anti-climactic because Yogi's overdetermined open secret leaves Sudo's breakdown and oblique coming-out underwhelming. Particularly as it is rooted in an individualized struggle, itself invisible and only implied, and isolated from any wider context. Sudo's character is not permitted a humanizing back story, which, while caricatured, is permitted to Yogi. Instead, the diegesis diverts attention away from Sudo and the present-time of the film leaves Yogi in stasis to resolve the love triangle.

Given the minimal diegetic space Sudo's breakdown is afforded in contrast to its centrality to the plot, the more important question is what is the purpose of the non-sequitur of Sudo's choice of a male dance partner? Together with the banal intergenerational conflict between Sudo and Yogi and the eschewing of 'gay' as an identity, the non-sequitur can be understood as part of the marketability of the film as indicated by Johar's discussion of its production context. As a 'launch pad for [the] three kids',—Alia Bhatt, Varun Dhawan, and Sidharth Malhotra—*SOTY* pulls out every gimmick in, what I'm calling, the Karan Johar playbook and his focus on 'commercial success' (Johar and Saxena 141).

That is, the rationale for the unremarkableness of Sudo's struggles can be understood in the context of catering to an implied liberal and elite audiences' sensibilities in a bid to both remain relevant to the youth but also to be seen as making films with a social message. He says: 'producers have to be creative to push a film. . .The audience is always smarter. Every consumer is born with an instinct. . .you can't take the consumer for granted anymore' (122). The insertion of a banal and un-remarkable character with an

imputed and unnamed same-sex sexuality as marginal to the plot is also seen in *Dear Zindagi* as well, it further establishes the use of the non-sequitur as part of the strategy of the Karan Johar playbook. The use of such characters without developing their struggles in nuanced and meaningful ways serves the purpose of diversifying the film as a tokenistic check-box exercise. It also saturates the public sphere with upper-class, English-speaking, non-threatening images of male same-sex sexuality.

Therefore, the introduction of male same-sex sexuality without attending to the issues faced by LGBTQ+ people works as a gimmick. It serves the purpose of diversifying the film as a product while at the same time capitalizing on the banalisation of male same-sex sexuality, the gentrification of homophobia, and the representation of acceptance of same-sex sexuality by upper-class characters.

This gimmick, and Johar's use of it, can be further understood through the production context of *KHNNH* and in *Dostana*. While both films were not directed by Johar, they are both Dharma films and Johar affirms his key role therein. Not only did he 'write *KHNNH*' but also '[directed it] from somebody else's shoulder' (Johar and Saxena 82). With *KHNNH* he in fact expresses sincere regret at not directing the film saying, 'in spirit, in heart, perhaps in execution, it's completely my film' (84). This puts into relief his role in writing, directing, and conceptualizing the innumerable scenes of homoeroticism and homophobia in these films. *Dostana* on the other hand develops this perspective on same-sex sexuality, since he says 'Tarun made *Dostana* for [Dharma], an idea of mine that he developed' (115) but more importantly shows Johar's role in the marketing of same-sex sexuality as a 'gimmick' (116). As part of the learning process after inheriting Dharma Productions from his father in 2004, Johar says not only did he now have 'professional freedom' (103) but was also learning about 'the distribution and marketing of films' (116). He says:

Dostana was one of our highly marketed movies . . . I have a good mind about how to project a film, 'platform' it, and position it. It's not just about making a product, it's also about how you pitch it to the consumer, the cine-goer . . . We gave *Dostana* an interesting promo. We said, 'From the makers of *KKHH*, *K3G*. . . *KHNNH*, here comes another kind of a love story. "Tum gay ho" (You are gay). It was an interesting gimmick. . . we introduced the whole homosexual angle with a lot of fun. We positioned the film for the youth (116).

It is then significant that *KHNNH* and *Dostana*, in chronological order, are both important precursors in the production/consumption dialectic affecting, in this case, the representation of male same-sex sexuality in *SOTY*. The new and young elite audiences serve as an indicator of the key target audience emerging out of the transformation and gentrification of Hindi cinema. It is this audience that Johar is catering to at the head of Dharma Productions and riding the waves of transformation afforded by the gentrification of homophobia, the successful deployment of his open secret, and the marketability of same-sex sexuality while balancing the profitability in making films.

Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how the open secret is central to the 'KJo' brand. This involves negotiating the ambivalences of class, rationalisation of production, and capitalising on the space opened-up for alternative sexualities in public culture. I have argued

that what the ‘KJo’ brand also achieves is the entrepreneurial and profitable navigation of Johar’s own celebrity and unnamed sexuality in a conservative and risk-averse industry, while remaining rooted in the neoliberal dynamics of the new middle-classes. My reading draws on the absence of his clarification of his own sexuality, and argues that it allows for an ambiguity in taking a stand on LGBTQ+ issues while using the open secret for a profitable deployment of same-sex sexuality in shaping his celebrity and within the ‘KJo’ films. Furthermore, through his entrepreneurial spirit, I have shown that the Karan Johar playbook is an entertainment formula that is rapidly being replicated in advertisements, films, and videos in the wider cultural industry. His successful navigation of the ambivalences at the turn of the century alongside the continued consumption of the ‘KJo’ brand needs to be both recognised and held accountable in the marketization of male same-sex sexuality. Following Ashish Nandy who argues the ‘popular film is low-brow, modernizing India in all its complexity, sophistry, naiveté and vulgarity’ (7), it is also crucial to account for production and consumption as intricately tied when examining the representation of same-sex sexuality. It demonstrates both the centrality of the ‘KJo’ brand in enabling a destigmatized representation of a neoliberal and depoliticized male same-sex sexuality and its continual consumption and proliferation in South Asian public culture.

The success of the ‘KJo’ brand and film lies in its mobilization of a conditional normalization of male same-sex sexuality. It signals Johar’s successful gamble with the deployment of the open secret of his own unnamed sexuality and emphasises a politics that is geared towards commercial success first and foremost, eschewing a political stance that might serve as a detriment to it. Within this context male same-sex sexuality is co-opted as a gimmick and signals the coming of age of the neoliberal male same-sex desiring individual. It reinforces of the values of commercial success, eschews the struggles of the previous decades marking the emergence of a destigmatized unnamed upper-class male same-sex sexuality.

Notes

1. Gauri Shinde is also the director of Dharma film *Dear Zindagi* (Dear Life) (2016) which focuses on mental health but features one of the earliest male characters in Dharma films who proclaims he is gay, and is not pretending, only to then disappear entirely from the film. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C20SmW662UQ>
2. More on this later.
3. These have included the Hindi film actor Kajol and reality TV stars such as season one *MasterChef* winner Pankaj Bhadouria (“*MasterChef*”).
4. While some scholars have used the term queer to describe mainstream cultural production, including the ‘KJo’ film, and while queer is used as a marker of identity in South Asia, I find it important to avoid this usage for two reasons. On one hand, the anglophone term queer is a unique marker of privileged identity in India and is predicated on access to discourses in the US and the UK. Instead, filmmakers and activists I have interviewed over my fieldwork have pointed out that queer signifies an upper-class elite positionality in India that does not carry the same valences of shame and reclamation as queer in the anglophone West (Asrani, 2017). Secondly, in cognisance of queer as a counter-hegemonic positionality and usage in queer theory (see Luther and Ung Loh, ‘*Queer*’ Asia: *Decolonising and Reimagining Sexuality and Gender*) it is important to also differentiate it from the deployment of same-sex representation for profitability. This avoids the reduction of complexities in questions

around queer as a positionality and as a traveling theoretical framework (Tellis and Bala), as well as contrary reading practices (Schoonover and Galt, 2016). As this chapter is not focused on the trajectories of queerness I avoid the use of the term, which merits a longer discussion (but see Luther and Ung Loh, 2019). Furthermore, as Ruby Rich notes on new queer cinema as a ‘moment’ (16) I find that the use of the term queer in relation to Johar—who has maintained a refusal to name his sexual identity—requires negotiating multiple complexities outside of the scope of this article. Jabir Puar’s articulation on the epistemic violence that accompanies traveling theories in “‘I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess’: Intersectionality, Assemblage, and Affect Politics’ (2012) I find also applicable to an un-nuanced use of use of queer as an identity in the context of Johar given his studied distance from the term.

5. My use of South Asian public culture here differs from Gayatri Gopinath’s formulation of South Asian public culture. Gopinath deploys it to theorize a subjectivity under erasure and counter-hegemonic cultural practice located at the intersection of queer and the South Asian diaspora. However, my engagement is with the production and distribution of cultural texts emerging from a majoritarian cultural nationalist and neoliberal context within which male same-sex sexuality is being co-opted, marketized, and rearticulated through a hegemonic caste and class nexus. Moreover, my engagement emerges from my queer positionality (an oppositional resistant positionality) cognisant of the consumption of cultural production in South Asia itself rather than in mediation through the diaspora. Gargi Bhattacharyya’s formulation of public culture as an ‘[exploration of] political formations through an understanding of everyday cultures’ (6) is more expedient to my analysis and critique (even though this latter too is oriented towards the diaspora in the UK).
6. The latter include his appearances as a judge on reality TV shows, including dance competitions such as in *Jhalak Dikhhla Jaa*, in his new Netflix reality dating show *What the Love! With Karan Johar*, and on the radio talk show *Calling Karan* (ISHQ), his well-known TV talk show *Koffee with Karan*, and his social media accounts, particularly Instagram stories.
7. I follow David Harvey in understanding neoliberalism as ‘a theory of political economic practices that [ties] human well-being [to] liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets [and] trade’ (2).
8. I discuss the ‘KJo’ film in more detail later.
9. It is also useful to place Dyer’s articulation of the production/consumption dialectic in the context of Horkheimer and Adorno’s (1996) understanding of marketing within the cultural industries.
10. On the question of Hindi cinema and middle-class ideology and neoliberalism also see Vasudevan, “Shifting Codes, Dissolving Identities”; Nandy; Dwyer, *All You Want Is Money, All You Need Is Love*; Ganti.
11. See also Rohit Dasgupta who argues for the situatedness and recognition of new media and social networking sites in relation to queer culture (2017).
12. During my Ph.D. fieldwork in Mumbai and Pune in December 2016 and January 2017, I tried many ways to gain an interview and access to Karan Johar himself. This included access through my supervisor Rachel Dwyer, through friends working in Dharma, through friends who were RJs in Ishq.FM with whom Karan Johar, at the time, was producing and featuring in his Radio talk show called ‘Calling Karan’ (ISHQ.FM). All of these were met with a gate-keeper in the form of Johar’s personal secretary and attests to the role of class-based elite networks and closed circles in controlling access to Bollywood celebrities (Ganti). I finally did manage to pose a specific question in regard to Karan Johar’s role in shaping male same-sex representation to him in person at the JLF Lit Fest at the British Library later in 2017 where Prof. Dwyer was in conversation with him. The answer was not unexpectedly evasive but is in some ways responded to in his biography. His personal secretary referred me to his forthcoming biography on the phone in Jan 2017 when refusing my many requests and approaches to interview him.

13. My enquiry into Johar's refusal to name his sexuality while continuing to deploy the open secret as an enticement is not driven by any intention to out him, but rather, it serves to recognise and situate the particularity of his politics of refusal through which same-sex sexuality is depoliticized, made marketable, and deployed in the service of film production and branding. Furthermore, while this process is mappable to homocapitalism and homonationalism as outlined by several US-based queer theorists (Puar, Duggan, Berlant and Warner), I think there is also a need for contextual specificity in the use of these terms. The US homocapitalist discourse emerges from the granting of rights to LGBTQ+ people, particularly to serve in the military, this is not the case in India. Therefore, Karan Johar's negotiation of the representation of same-sex sexuality is not based on state sanction or legality but rather trades on the social capital he has already built for himself, and that of his father and Dharma's, his approach is therefore tentative, ambivalent, and in measured navigating societal opprobrium, risk in film production as business, and his own political beliefs.
14. I draw on Rajadhyaksha, Ganti, Dwyer and Pinney, and Vasudevan, "The Meanings of 'Bollywood'" to understand Bollywood to mean both the larger cultural conglomeration surrounding the Hindi film industry – this includes not just the films themselves, but their promotion through stand-alone music videos, spoofs and comedy shows on YouTube, film magazines and news coverage, as well as content produced on radio and television, the presence of stars and celebrities on various shows including popular talk show—and the name for a particular brand of filmmaking post-liberalization inflected by new production, distribution, and consumption opportunities catering to elite national and new diasporic markets, indicative of specific distribution circuits in multiplex theatres with higher price tags— and increasingly on Video on Demand platforms (VOD) such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, etc. – produced by professional production companies.
15. I avoid the term homonationalism as an assessment of its origins, trajectory, and take up in other contexts lies outside the scope of this essay. Furthermore, such an assessment needs more context including a wider discussion with filmmakers themselves.
16. This is not to suggest that images are not re-purposed and subverted by consumers, rather the focus of this article is to examine the role of the producer, in this case Karan Johar, and how it informs the cultural codes and representation of male same-sex sexuality.
17. However, I also remain mindful of the fact that Bollywood films attend to profit-maximization because of Hindi cinema's long and tenuous relationship with the state through heavy taxation and censorship.
18. For instance, he mentions his text messages and discussions with the director Nikhil Advani on the 'representation of homosexuality in [the 2003] film *Kal Ho Naa Ho*' (114). Similarly, he mentions that director Tarun Mansukhani developed further his idea in making *Dostana* (115). Irrefutably the absence of the documentation of this influence is an important lost archive informing the question of representation of same-sex sexuality in South Asian public culture. See *Unsuitable* on Johar's conversations with Shabana Azmi, Farah Khan, and others on the politics of representation.
19. See Berlant and Warner, Duggan, and Puar on this.
20. Simi Garewal is a former Hindi film actress turned TV talk show host. All the episodes here – www.simigarewal.com.
21. These include rumours about being paired with the star Shah Rukh Khan, his overseas trips, and lovers in other countries.
22. Although this is different from Onir, Sridhar Rangayan, more recently Apurva Asrani and Faraz Ansari who are now well-known for making LGBTQ+ films.
23. On the popularity of Hindi cinema divas, especially in gay clubs and nightlife see Khubchandani, "Dance Floor Divas"; Dudrah, "The Secret Politics Are Out?" 53.
24. In fact, Karan Johar audibly says, indicating his father, 'poor fellow doesn't know I have no interest . . . [in a wife]' (*Rendezvous-KK*).
25. On the early beginnings of the struggle towards decriminalization in India see Sukthankar, 'For People Like Us'; also see Dave.

26. While there is relatively little systematic research on the TV talk show in India (although see Singh), the questions of the production of talk shows in the US have been fairly well discussed (see Timberg and Erler; Gamson).
27. see Singh, “Queer Bollywood: The Homo-Textuality of Celebrity Talk Show Gossip”
28. See Dwyer, “Bollywood’s India”; Ganti, *Producing Bollywood*; Vasudevan; Rajadhyaksha, “The ‘bollywoodization’ of the Indian Cinema”.
29. The scope of this essay prevents delving into the extensive literature on Hindutva.
30. Here the literature on neoliberal feminism and femvertising offers a relevant means to further examine the depoliticization of male same-sex sexuality (see Banet-Weiser).
31. Other brands with advertisements featuring LGB and particularly trans* identities include Anouk by Myntra, Red Lotus, UrbanClap, Times of India classified section, Vicks, Mid-Day newspaper, also see Vanita.
32. See the Myntra advertisement here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ef27m5ocK6Q&list=LLib6VwRvKWL2EAdpH6TQ0Wg&index=863>.
33. See the AIB Roast here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvyAEqQtC7Q>.
34. See *Sasuraal Gaynda Fool* here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDXPtePlj-U&t=1s>.
35. See also Vasudevan, “Shifting Codes, Dissolving Identities”; Vasudevan, “Sexuality and the Film Apparatus”.
36. Such as is staple in roles played by actor Johnny Lever (see Luther and Ung Loh, 2017).
37. Here I draw on Sedgwick’s, 1985’s notion of the homosocial triangle.
38. On this erotic play acting see Waugh, 2002; Dudrah, “The Secret Politics Are Out?”
39. Although contrary and resistant reading practices have rightly argued that queer audiences overwrite and circumvent this intentionality.
40. See Schoonover and Galt’s, 2016’s reading of *Dostana* that offers a compelling examination of the role of the popular in navigating questions of the homonational, homophobic, and tolerant. They argue that ‘queer representation in popular genres [to] signal acute moments of historical tension that cannot be reduced to a single frame of reference’ (187). See also Rohit 2014 Dasgupta (2014) on the queer possibilities and pleasures through the slippage between the homosocial and the homosexual, in a Sedgwickian formulation through *Dostana*. My focus here on *Dostana* as a well discussed film is only the gentrification of homophobia demonstrated through the parallel between classes to compare Kanta-ben in *KHNH*, Mrs. Acharya in *Dostana*, and Jeet Khurana in *SOTY*.
41. (“Dostana brought conversation of homosexuality into people’s drawing room: Karan Johar”)
42. This depoliticized same-sex and trans* sexuality increasingly appears in other Bollywood films after *Dostana* such as in *Dishoom* (Dhawan), *Padmaavat* (Bhansali). Increasingly, however, some questions of larger struggles have also begun inform Bollywood films with *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (Dhar), *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (Kewalya), and on webseries such as *Made in Heaven*, *Four More Shots Please*, and in the Indian diaspora in the US with *Never Have I Ever*.
43. This is an important point in the marketing of films with same-sex representation. Several filmmakers in non-Western context—with whom I have interacted with as the festival director of the ‘Queer’ Asia film festivals (in 2017, 2018, 2019, and online in 2020)—suggest that queer is both a term that needs translation (or at least transliteration) in non-Western contexts (see Luther and Ung Loh, 2019), and it is also a term that is used to position a film in the contemporary international film-festival circuit (Loist, 2012). This is another reason to be far more cautious with the academic use of the word queer, lest its cavalier usage replicate new imperial formulations (see Tellis and Bala).

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