"Jol" or "Pani"?: How Does Governance Shape a Platform's Identity?

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In this paper, we explore how sociotechnical systems support and impede the identity performances and identity expression of communities that have experienced a long history of colonialism, where colonization is the practice through which a foreign power reshapes the social structures and systems of other societies. We conducted a trace ethnography among members of a specific digital platform—Bengali Quora (BnQuora). BnQuora is part of the question and answer (Q&A) platform Quora, where people with this particular ethnolinguistic identity come together to engage in conversations about their identities; identities which were shaped through a long history of colonization in the Global South. In drawing on a conceptual framework that brings together identity performativity, governance, content moderation, and surveillance, we find that the sociotechnical mechanisms of governance that mediate people's performances on the BnQuora platform give rise to a kind of platform identity—certain identities are privileged while others are pushed to the margins based on linguistic practices, nationalities, and religious affiliations. We illustrate this through the themes of moderators as prison guards, collective surveillance as enforcing a majority identity, algorithmic coloniality, and staging as self-imprisonment. Finally, we discuss the ways in which governance shapes a platform's identity and can create, strengthen, and reinforce coloniality.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Platform Identity, Bengali, Quora, Panoptic Performativity, Colonialism, Sociotechnical systems

1 INTRODUCTION

Marginalization is a process where people in a society are pushed to the fringes and denied their voice or place within it [26, 114]. One of the primary ways marginalization happens is based on people's identity [26, 101]. Identity is traditionally conceived as one's self-concept—how a person perceives themselves as a physical or social being [32, 46]. In this view, identity relates to

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how a person sees themselves and how they want others to see them. Whereas identity is often conceived as an individuated concept [32, 75], for many people identity can also be constructed through their membership in broader social groups [12, 46, 54]. People often construct their individuated identity in relation to broader categorical and/or collective identities, such as nationality, ethnicity, race, sexuality, religion, and gender expression [54, 56, 110]. Yet, people are often pushed to the boundaries of society, or marginalized, based on their individual and/or intersecting identities [31]. Marginalized groups experience barriers in living their daily lives, being themselves, and seeing themselves represented as manifest in how marginalization becomes institutionalized and normalized in societal structures and systems [20, 118].

Today, a broad range of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) allow marginalized groups to be themselves or see themselves represented in others [24, 52]. Scholarship in CSCW and CHI has found that online community spaces provide opportunities for people to negotiate and think about their identities [21, 24, 53]. Conversely, other scholars have highlighted how people with marginalized identities continue to experience harassment [78], exclusion [92, 117], and other forms of harm through their engagements in online spaces [67, 83].

To further examine the relationship between marginalization and sociotechnical systems, we focus on the experiences of peoples whose identities were and continue to be shaped by colonialism. From a sociohistorical perspective, colonization involved the enslavement, rape, and genocide of the indigenous and other local populations in "foreign" societies and social systems. While colonization has occurred globally, such as in the Global South, the Middle East, and the African Continent, coloniality has and continues to shape the social structures that mediate people's everyday experiences, primarily through the erasure, and thus marginalization, of the ways of knowing of other societies. Coloniality, for example, has shaped the very fabric of Western societies—the United States is built on the foundation of slavery and the erasure of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) identities. In building on these perspectives, scholars have started to pay attention to the ways in which broader societal systems, and more recently, sociotechnical systems, are shaped by and through coloniality [2, 26, 28]. Specifically, this leads to the broader question of how sociotechnical systems can support or impede conversations about colonized histories?

In this paper, we use trace ethnography as an inductive approach to explore people's experiences using BnQuora–a community built into the Quora Q&A platform to support a specific ethnolinguistic identity–to learn about, understand, and engage in Q&A based conversations about colonized histories. We find that the design of sociotechnical systems can embody coloniality that mediate's people's experiences in adverse and problematic ways. Specifically, our findings underscore how the broader colonial identity shaping the Global South gets reflected in the norms that mediate people's interactions of BnQuora and highlight the myriad ways in which this sociotechnical coloniality marginalizes groups of users based on various identity characteristics like religion and language. To do so, we develop a conceptual frame that draws on concepts of performative identity [12], governance [44], and surveillance [35]. Specifically, through an analysis of trace ethnographic data [39, 80] derived from Q&A threads on BnQuora, findings reveal that the governance structures and content moderation practices of Quora gives rise to platform identities–platforms can come to privilege certain identities while pushing other identities to the margins, thus serving to reinforce hegemonic values and norms.

It is important to note that while our work stayed true to ethnographic tradition, the context of the work and its focus on conversations about colonial histories is inherently political. Moreover, and as is an important part of ethnographic tradition, the unique identities and reflexivity of the authors has shaped the interpretations of the data which are presented in this work (see section 4.3 for a lengthier discussion of how researcher positionality may have shaped the findings).

2 RESEARCH SITE: BENGALI QUORA (BNQUORA) AS A LINGUISTIC CONVERSATIONAL SPACE

Bengali (endonym Bangla) is the sixth most-spoken native language (approximately 259.89 million) and the seventh most-spoken language by the total number of speakers (approximately 267.76 million) in the world [1, 88]. The Bengalis (endonym Bangali) are an ethnolinguistic group native to the Bengal region of South Asia who speak the language Bengali. Historically, Bengal was the first region in the Indian subcontinent to be colonized by the British in 1757. During the later phase of British rule, in 1905, Bengal was divided on the basis of religion – into East Bengal (predominantly Bengali Muslims) and West Bengal (predominantly Bengali Hindus). This division was nullified in 1911. However, Bengal was again used as a site of partition by the British in 1947 to draw the borders of India and Pakistan. This time, West Bengal became a state of India and East Bengal became a part of Pakistan and was renamed as East Pakistan, both of which experienced huge migration and refugee crisis during the partition [82]. Linguistic and cultural oppression by the West Pakistani rulers along with many other socio-political reasons strengthened Bengali nationalism among the Bengalis in East Pakistan to the liberation war and the independence of Bangladesh [95].

Presently, the Bengalis live in Bangladesh and some states of India, while the global Bengali diaspora have well-established communities in many other countries of the world. In Bangladesh, 98% of the people speak Bengali as their native language [33] and Bengali is the state language of the country [48]. In India, Bengali is recognized as the state language of West Bengal [49], Assam [58], and Tripura [106], while several other states have substantial Bengali speaking populations [49]. The Bengalis being spread across different countries and a vast region, the Bengali language has many different dialects as the social practices within this ethnolinguistic group also vary. Noticeable differences in dialects and social practices can be found among the Bengalis in Bangladesh and West Bengal, India (e.g., Bangal and Ghoti), even within different regions of Bangladesh (e.g., Sylhet and Chittagong) [30].

The Bengali people, historically being part of the same ethnolinguistic group, presently live as inhabitants of two independent countries in a postcolonial era. Over time, living in separate countries has weakened the bonds among them [66]. Today, however, the Bengali people have access to BnQuora. Users of BnQuora interact with one another using the Bengali language. In this way, the design of the platform, in enforcing the use of a regional language for communication amongst its members, gives rise to a distinct linguistic identity. Many of the users of BnQuora often reflect upon this characteristic of the platform and how it is shaping both the network of people who participate and the kinds of questions people are asking:

> Why are only questions about West Bengal and Bangladesh being asked on Bengali Quora? Is no one interested in other topics?

In responding to these kinds of questions, the users of BnQuora are engaged in lively conversations about the region's history of colonial subjugation and the ways in which their people have been separated. Yet, through their use of BnQuora, users find that they are able to restore the communication gap that has emerged through their colonial histories:

> It is as if two long-lost brothers have been reunited for a long time as if their curiosity does not end.

In this way, BnQuora is functioning as a space whereby the Bengalis in Bangladesh and India can interact and learn from one another. Thus, on the surface, BnQuora serves as a space for people to practice and perform their Bengali linguistic identity.

To better understand the interactions of people using BnQuora, we next draw on literature from colonial and postcolonial studies, performative identity, and governance, as the framework to help situate and interpret these interactions.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 The Relationship Between Identity and Coloniality: A Postcolonial Perspective

Historically, colonization has served as a primary mechanism for restructuring societal systems and marginalizing people's identities. Colonization, broadly conceived, are the policies and practices through which external powers migrate to and exercise control–full or partial– over a country and its people [65, 72, 107]. Through prolonged colonization, foreign powers marginalize the linguistic and ritualistic norms and practices of the indigenous and other local populations–their identities–in long-lasting ways. This relates to postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha's [8] concept of hybridity. People's identities are not fixed in time and space–rather, hybrid identities are produced through processes of translation whereby colonizing forces come to establish new logics that merge the language and rituals of "the locals" with that of colonizing forces. For example, during British colonialism, the European and Indic languages of South Asia became integrated where, over time, various non-Indic words became normative within everyday conversational vocabularies. The use of language becomes a way in which power is exercised by colonizing forces over their subjects. For people in the Indian subcontinent, the regional languages are Hindi, Bengali, Telegu, Marathi, and more. In India, in particular, English was introduced during the British colonial era, and is still used as an official language in educational and administrative contexts despite colonial rule ending in 1947. While, many of this country of 1.35 billion people [113] cannot understand and communicate in English, it remains nonetheless an official language that continues to marginalize regional languages [62].

The British colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent–comprising modern day Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan–exemplify the legacy and impacts of colonialism on people's identities. Beyond language, colonization has created myriad fractures in the relationships and diverse national, religious, linguistic and other identities of people in the Global South [38, 60, 81]. For example, in the specific context of Bengal, the agrarian structure introduced by the British rulers' land reform policy named Permanent Settlement, the elite class took the position of *zamindars* (landlords) who acted on behalf of the colonial power [14]. Most of these elite individuals belonged to educated, financially sound, high Hindu castes, while most of the peasants[1] serving under them were illiterate and poor Muslims[2]. In a way, religious identities became associated with one's social status. According to Chatterji [14], the conflict among these two classes, among other factors, led to Muslim separatist ideology in East Bengal, and an emergent Hindu communal identity. Scholars have argued that the division of Bengal on the basis of religion which divided the region into a Hindu majority state in India and a Muslim majority that was annexed to Pakistan (later independent Bangladesh), can be attributed to the amplified religious division that was architected by colonial rulers through the divide and rule policy–a policy that created an adversarial structure in the region [51, 81].

In the context of computing, scholars have explored the ways in which digital platforms also come to exhibit a kind of coloniality. In CSCW and CHI, the formative work of Irani and colleagues [59] developed the conceptual lens of postcolonial computing. In this work, the authors

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[1]Using the term as it was used by [14]

[2]There were Hindu peasants as well. However, as religious cultural identities: Hinduness and Muslimness were being politicized, low caste and illiterate Hindu peasants and workers were extracted out of the mass of *chhotolok* (meaning uncivilized) and merged into the extended Hindu community [14].

argue that sociotechnical systems are designed with values, and as systems migrate globally, technology can embody a colonialist impulse. Much like how colonists migrated to foreign lands and engaged in practices that have revised people's cultures and norms, so too can technology. Moreover, postcolonial computing scholars have highlighted how, in the context of design, this kind of work often emerges top-down [59, 76, 85]. This top-down design paradigm has a dramatic effect–it continues to reinforce hegemonic power structures and norms which can impact people's identities and identity expression.

Scholars have explored how digital platforms afford and enable the opportunity for people to express their identities and build community for different identities [54, 56]. More broadly, scholars have found that digital platforms, such as Facebook, Reddit, and Archive of Our Own, have supported identity expression and the enactment of social support around people's identities [26, 29, 52]. The CSCW and CHI community has examined the ways in which digital platforms support people across a range of life changes, such as when moving to college [17, 105], transitioning out of the military [98, 100], coming out as LGBTQ+ [29, 52, 53], and more. Conversely, scholarship has also highlighted the ways in which digital spaces might threaten people's identities and identity expression [21, 24, 50, 52]. For example, exploring the performance of fatherhood on social media Ammari and Schoenebeck [3, 4] find that the performances related to sharing information about children or fatherhood was stigmatized. Similarly, the work of Haimson and colleagues [52] illustrates how during gender transitions, the presence of family and friends on Facebook can serve as both a source of stress and support.

Thus, the sociotechnical systems people use every day might privilege certain identities and identity expressions while marginalizing others. This leads to the question of how the designed logics of sociotechnical systems mediate identity enactment and expression?

3.2 Performative Identity and Linguistic Marginalization

To explore this question, we draw on the social interactionist view of identity, which views identity as an emergent product of interaction [10, 46, 55]. The formative work of Erving Goffman [46] argues that identity is constructed in relation to social context. He develops this view through a dramaturgical lens, arguing that people draw on extant rules and norms within the social settings they are embedded to perform their self-identities. This social interactionist view of identity exemplifies the strong relationship between individuals and societal context as a whole.

Moreover, Goffman's [46] work asserts that people performing in relation to these extant rules and norms is the correct way to act, and that acting outside of this constitutes deviant, inappropriate behavior. In simultaneously building on and critiquing Goffman's work, Judith Butler [11, 12] draws on gender performances to illustrate how societal power is generated by and through the construction of normative identities and misperceptions of identities (e.g. gender, nationality, sexuality, and race). In this view, societal constructions determine which identities and identity performances are considered normative and non-normative. Drawing on a gendered performance lens, she argues how gender is not a fixed identity. Rather, gender is constructed and learned through everyday performances (e.g. speech acts and non-verbal actions) in different social settings, and are thus modeled after normative cultural and societal logics. For example, in some cultural contexts, women learn that certain language and style of dress, such as wearing skirts and makeup, are feminine. This work underscores the ways in which identities are political and used as a way of creating power differentials in society.

On a broad level, the work of Butler highlights how members of various collective identities, such as racial, ethnic, and religious identities, learn to perform and maintain those identities as mediated by normative social, cultural, and institutional logics. People from myriad racial and ethnic identities perform the specific language (e.g. regional dialects and marriage ceremonies) and

symbolic rituals that continuously re-construct and maintain those identities. It is through these performances that individuals become perceived members or maintain membership in racial and ethnic groups–they come to learn the history, language or dialect, and symbolic systems like religion and cuisine that give them membership into various identity categories. Yet, despite the logics that often mediate how people enact, perform, and maintain their identities, these performances can come in conflict with how individuals see themselves–their self-concept. The social settings can even threaten internalized version of themselves, making it difficult to enact and perform that identity [46]. In other words, people can be marginalized, or excluded to the periphery of society and denied their place in it, based on myriad dimensions of their self-identities, such as their gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, and more [26, 31, 94]. For example, for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+), the experience of coming out–the disclosure of one's sexual and/or gender identity–can be stressful, and even traumatic, as that identity faces verbal and physical discrimination across social settings, such as home and school environments, and mass media representations [18, 29]. When inflicted through language this discrimination often takes the form of bullying, hate speech, and threats.

Taken together, language is a central feature of people's identities and of marginalization. In our work we define language as the expression of culture: it is a medium through which we perceive and understand reality [115]. Language can create vulnerability as the use of language can exercise power over people by "othering" them [13]. In this view, language is used as a way in which to create power differentials in society, where it establishes who is considered normative and non-normative. For example, in societies that have a national language, such as English in the United States, those whose primary language is not English may feel alien and like non-normative members of society.

While the expression and use of language can take on various forms, such as through speech, text, symbols, and hand gestures, in our work we explore the ways in which language is used to shape the norms of online community spaces.

3.3 Governance as Surveillance: Towards Platform Identity

The uses of language in online spaces are often mediated by and through sociotechnical mechanisms of governance–the structures that mediate interactions in digital spaces [103]. Governance can shape the underlying norms of a community in ways that enable or threaten people's identities and identity expression. Here, we focus on one explicit kind of governance: content moderation. Content moderation is a mechanism of governance through which people's performances in digital spaces (e.g. the content being produced by people in digital spaces) are established as acceptable or not [44, 91, 93]. The Internet gradually gave rise to a combination of human and machine (e.g. algorithmic) moderation processes through which rules and norms were created and enforced [43, 44].

On a broad level, moderators are often considered the custodians of the Internet–they engage in the work of scrubbing the Internet of harmful content [44, 91]. In this view, moderators play an instrumental role in creating and sustaining supportive community spaces conducive to fruitful engagement, while also playing the role of "protector" in eliminating dangerous content like hate speech and fake news. In this way, moderators can also come to hold a lot of authority and power of the spaces they govern. This is best illustrated by Seering and colleagues [96] who used metaphors like dictator, governor, and judge to describe moderators.

CSCW and HCI scholars, in examining the governance of online communities, have explored digital spaces that are mediated by transparent systems of governance, such as Reddit [23, 61].

Early work on moderation, in drawing heavily on qualitative methods, discussed the power structures manifest in large-scale moderation practices on online platforms like Usenet, multi-user dungeons, internet-relay chat, mailing lists, and more [87, 104]. Other scholars have focused on user-governed communities like Wikipedia [5, 84], Slashdot [69, 86], and free open source software communities [90, 116]. These studies have drawn on quantitative methods to explore the ways in which online behavior is shaped and regulated by and through moderation, and how moderation contributes to the success and growth of online communities [68, 102]. Moreover, scholars have examined the evolution of moderation practices, highlighting the different philosophies of moderation over time [16, 27, 36, 64]. Recent work on moderation have explored how different kinds of moderation impact the platform's organizational, legal, and technical standpoints [44], how moderation practices and user-behavior mutually influence and inform one another [34, 40, 77, 97], and how moderation impacts the very people who engage in this often volunteer work [25, 26, 63]. Yet, not all systems govern in transparent ways–prompting the question of how a lack of transparent governance might shape the underlying characteristics of a sociotechnical system and, in turn, enable or threaten decolonization processes and associated identity expression?

To explore this question, we draw on Michel Foucault [35] who, in Discipline and Punishment, describes the ways in which structures of governance shape social and societal norms in modern societies. To formulate his argument, Foucault draws on the concept of the panopticon, as developed by Jeremy Bentham [7]. The panopticon refers to a specific prisons design centered around a tower where the prison guards can observe all of the surrounding cells and, in turn, the behavior of the inmates who are imprisoned. Yet, the tower is designed to keep the inmates uncertain about whether or not they are being observed. Thus, the presence of surveillance mediates the behavior of inmates. Not knowing they are being watched, prisoners engage in obedience through self-regulation, and thus discipline themselves.

The perception of being under constant surveillance can become deeply embedded into the social fabric. Certain behaviors and performances are normalized while others are rendered non-normative and marginal–what we refer to as panoptic performativity. Beyond prisons, for example, in a social setting what behaviors are deemed professional or modern is dictated by the people in the position of power (e.g., colonially imposed ways of dressing over the ethnic attires). However, these standards are actualized not through any repressive power, rather through normalization and surveillance so that people undertake the ritualized performativity on their own. The individuals who do not conform to those rituals are denied access to places, such as an Indian getting her entry rejected to a local golf club for wearing traditional attire [22].

In the context of digital spaces, the mechanisms of governance can also reflect this panoptic performativity whereby they serve to normalize certain performances of identity and threaten other performances of identity. Importantly, governance extends beyond the role of moderators. That is, there are various social and technical mechanisms that shape, regulate, and thus normalize online community behaviors. For example, through the various sociotechnical mechanisms of Reddit, such as the karma system, upvoting and downvoting, and moderation practices, the site supports and reflects the values of the majority of the users and serves to marginalize the performances of other users of the platform [42]. For example, Gilbert [42] found that "the default masculine whiteness of Reddit" can marginalize women among others. In this way, governance, or surveillance, is mediated by various sociotechnical mechanisms that comprise online community spaces.

In this paper, we are interested in the systems of governance in one particular digital space–Quora[3]. Quora is a Q&A site established in June 2009. The objective of the platform is "to connect the people who have knowledge to the people who need it, to bring together people with different

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[3]https://www.quora.com/

perspectives so they can understand each other better, and to empower everyone to share their knowledge for the benefit of the rest of the world" [57]. Quora has an embedded social network structure. The users on Quora can follow each other (as social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, etc.) and participate in Q&A-based discussions in a threaded structure (similar to Reddit, StackExchange, etc.). It has been speculated that the platform has an anonymous body of human and machine moderators that govern the site[4]. Quora offers itself in more than twenty languages that creates greater accessibility for its potential users, and opportunity for more contextualized discussions on regional issues [19].

Here, we focus our analytic attention on the conversations emerging through one of the supported languages as part of this platform–BnQuora[5]–which was designed to enable conversations amongst people using the Bengali language. Through a trace ethnographic analysis [39, 80] of Q&A threads on BnQuora, findings reveal that the governance structures of Quora give rise to a platform identity–that is, platforms can come to privilege certain identities while pushing other identities to the margins, thus serving to reinforce hegemonic values and norms.

4 METHOD

This work is part of a larger project aimed at understanding the ways in which online platforms support identity work and identity expression. Here, we are specifically interested in understanding people's experiences using BnQuora, and the ways in which the broader systems of governance on BnQuora mediate the interactions between people of different national and religious identities. To familiarize readers with the Q&A thread structure and interface of BnQuora, we provide a screenshot of a BnQuora Q&A thread in Figure 1. We deployed a trace ethnographic study [39, 80] through which we collected people's digital interactions to understand this phenomenon in context.

4.1 Data Collection

To collect data that could help us understand the ways in which systems of governance mediate people's identity work and identity expression across national and religious identities in the context of the Global South—a region that was shaped by colonialism—our data collection process combined purposive sampling [109] and snowball sampling [47]. We used the quoras API [19] to collect data from BnQuora from 15 May 2020 to 15 July 2020.

In using purposive sampling [109], we created an initial list of terms that focused on identifying features of the platform (e.g. moderation and stages), narratives describing how people were experiencing governance, and different terms focused on the potential identities of the users across various dimensions, such as linguistic, national, or religious. While preparing this list of search phrases, we remained aware of and used both the archaic and revised spellings of our list of keywords (e.g., বাঙালি and বাঙালী for the same word "Bengali people"), and widely used synonyms and similar phrases (e.g., ভারত, ভারতবর্ষ, and ইন্ডিয়া all mean "India", where the first two words are endonyms for the country whereas the last is the exonym for the country).

Table 1 lists the keywords and phrases we used to generate our purposive dataset. Though the quoras API [19] supports keyword/phrase searching directly, it discourages the use of this function. To abide by the advisory *robots.txt* file of the BnQuora platform, we searched for the Q&A threads on the BnQuora platform containing our list of keywords or phrases directly using a web-browser. Using this sampling approach, we collected 178 unique Q&A thread URLs. We then passed the links of the returned threads to the API to retrieve and store details about those Q&A threads.

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[4]https://qr.ae/pGpbFT
[5]https://bn.quora.com/

Tags: *"Jol" (water), Quora Bengali, Quora community, Quora*

Question: *In the question, it was written "pani", it was edited as "jol". What is the problem in writing "pani" in BnQuora?*

Answer count: *16 answers*

Answerer user's profile picture, name, and profession(optional)

An answer

Comments on the answer

Answerer user's profile picture and name

Another answer

Comments on the answer

Answer text field for the user

Notice: *3 answers have been hidden (Why?)*

Fig. 1. A screenshot of a public BnQuora Q&A thread (https://qr.ae/pGPOSZ) accessed from the first author's account. The thread currently has 16 answers, only two of them are shown in the image as examples. Text on the right sides of the arrows describe the component (in bold) and translated short text (in italics).

Abiding by Quora's terms of service[6], we are not allowed to make our Q&A threads-dataset public. However, using the keywords listed in Table 1, our data set should be easily replicable.

Table 1. List of keywords and phrases. The search keywords/phrases are not sorted in any particular order.

Keyword/Phrase	Translation and Explanation (if needed)
Quora; Quora (কোম্পানি); Quora (পণ্য)	Quora; Quora (Company); Quora (Product)
Quora বাংলা	Quora Bengali/ Bengali Quora
Quora সম্প্রদায়	Quora community
Quora নীতিমালা	Quora policies

Table 1 continued: List of keywords and phrases

Keyword/Phrase	Translation and Explanation (if needed)
Quora ব্যবহার করা; Quora বাংলা ব্যবহারকারী; Quora লেখক; Quora ব্যবহারকারীদের মতামত	Using Quora; Quora users; Quora writers; Quora users' opinion
Quora এডমিন; Quora বাংলা মডারেশন; Quora বাংলা মডারেটর	Quora administrators; Bengali Quora moderation; Bengali Quora moderators
Quora মঞ্চ	Quora stages
Quora ত্যাগ	Leaving Quora
বাংলা; বাঙালি/বাঙালী	Bengali (language); Bengali (people)
ভাষা; আঞ্চলিক ভাষা; জাতীয়তা; জাতি; ধর্ম	Language; Regional language; Nationality; Nation; Religion
পূর্ববঙ্গ; পশ্চিমবঙ্গ; বাঙাল; ঘটি; বাঙাল ও ঘটি	East Bengal (modern day Bangladesh); West Bengal (Indian state); Bangal (a term to address the people of then-East Bengal); Ghoti (a term to address the people of West Bengal); Bangal and Ghoti
হিন্দু; মুসলিম; ইসলাম	Hindu (people)/Hinduism (religion); Muslim; Islam
বাংলাদেশ; বাংলাদেশি/বাংলাদেশী	Bangladesh; Bangladeshi
ভারত/ভারতবর্ষ/ইন্ডিয়া; ভারতীয়/ইন্ডিয়ান	Bharat (endonym of the country)/India (exonym of the country); Bharatiya (endonym for the people of India)/Indian (exonym for the people of India)
ভারতীয় উপমহাদেশ	Indian subcontinent

To increase the breadth and volume of the dataset, we used a form of snowball sampling [47] where we included related Q&A threads recommended by the Quora Recommendation Algorithm (QRA) [120]. The QRA seeks to learn about user interests, and recommends old and emerging threads. We call this second dataset the QRA recommendation-based dataset. We collected the URLs of 625 additional unique Q&A threads. Since the intermediate dataset was collected using an authors-prepared list of keywords, it contains Q&A threads on topics which the authors deemed as important and relevant. However, the QRA, like the recommendation systems on many other platforms [15] trains itself to learn the similarities among different topics and users' interests based on their posts [120]. Therefore, the QRA recommendation-based data collection contributes to diversify and broaden the scope of the dataset by incorporating the democratized views from the users. More accounts will be discussed in future work. The keywords-based dataset and QRA recommendation-based dataset were merged to create the final dataset of 803 Q&A threads we used for analysis.

4.2 Data Analysis

We used an approach from grounded theory [108] for our data analysis. This approach is widely used in qualitative research [25, 99, 112]. For the organization of our data analysis process, we used a qualitative data analysis software called Quirkos[7] to code the Bengali Q&A threads collected from

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[7]https://www.quirkos.com/

BnQuora. As outlined by Strauss and Corbin [108], we engaged in a process of open coding, where we identified the concepts that appeared repeatedly in the data. Some examples of the codes that emerged in this phase are: "anonymity of the moderators", "use of upvotes and downvotes", "difference in dialects", "difference in adoption of foreign words", "non-transparency of moderation". We then collaboratively engaged in the process of axial coding where we combined the open codes to create higher conceptual themes. For example, open codes like "difference in dialects", "difference in adoption of foreign words", "difference in use of synonyms" were merged to create the axial code "difference in language practice." Finally, in the selective coding phase, we highlighted the relationships among the axial codes, which led to the themes we present in this paper. The first author conducted the preliminary coding of the data and met the other authors weekly with English translations[8] of multiple exemplar quotations for each of the emergent open codes. The first author who has professional proficiency in both Bengali and English, carefully translated quotations from Bengali to English by translating each quotation multiple times and checking across the translations as a mechanism for internal validity [71, 73]. We performed a reflexive grounded theory-based data analysis [45, 108] which does not call for an inter-coder reliability score [74].

4.3 Researcher Positionality Statement

In studying people's identity work on sociotechnical systems, the authors' race and ethnicity can bring certain affinities into perspective [94]. The first author identifies as a Bangladeshi Bengali Hindu, cisgender, heterosexual man. The second author is a Danish, cisgender, heterosexual man. The third author is an Iraqi-American, cisgender, heterosexual man, from a minority group within Iraq. The first author has been using BnQuora since June 2019. Therefore, his familiarity with the sociocultural norms of the Bengali community as well as with the BnQuora community norms makes him aware of the sociomaterial context of this study.

4.4 Limitations

Our data is collected from a single online platform, Bengali Quora (BnQuora). However, this study is a part of a multi-sited study on the process of identity decolonization work on online platforms. Moreover, the data was collected from the site using the first author's user credentials through the quoras API [19]. Therefore, the search results that were included in the dataset might reflect the first author's user history on the platform at that time. While collecting data from a platform such as Quora, what data we can see and retrieve depends on the list of search keywords, the API user's access and privileges, the platform's search operation, and etc. These list, API, platform become the "apparatus" [6, 9] through which we view the users' activities on Quora. Diffractive methodology emphasizes that the apparatus and the phenomena under study are intertwined [6, 80], rendering the collected dataset co-configured by the apparatus (e.g., search keywords, API) and the phenomenon (e.g., user discussion and participation). Therefore, our final dataset may not be representative of the broad range of experiences amongst users of BnQuora. Through our simultaneous use of purposive sampling [109] and snowball sampling [47], however, our goal was to minimize the inherent biases in using APIs to collect data, though we acknowledge that this same limitation exists in most every study that utilizes APIs and keyword searches to collect data. Importantly, like other kinds of qualitative research [70], the objective of this research was not to produce generalizability, but rather to study a particular phenomenon in a defined context. In this particular paper, we are interested in understanding how the sociotechnical mechanisms of

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[8]In the results section of the paper, we include the English translations of the users' Bengali quotations only. However, we will be happy to make the Bengali quotations and the URLs of the corresponding Bengali Q&A threads available on request.

the BnQuora platform impact the identity performances, and future work should look into other platforms where such identity performances also take place.

5 RESULTS

On the surface, BnQuora serves as a space for the Bengali people to practice and perform their linguistic identities. On a deeper level, the governance structures of BnQuora serves to marginalize Bengali as a linguistic identity. In the sections that follow, we first provide an overview of the governance mechanisms that mediate people's interactions on BnQuora. We then describe how these mechanisms of governance come together and give rise to a platform identity: certain identity performances are normalized whereas others are marginalized.

5.1 Sociotechnical Mechanisms of Governance on BnQuora

In this section, we describe the sociotechnical mechanisms of governance that shape people's experiences and participation in Q&A conversational threads on BnQuora. These features include: the Quora Recommendation Algorithm (QRA), Quora Stages, the Be Nice, Be Respectful (BNBR) Policy, Upvoting and Downvoting, and Moderation.

5.1.1 Quora Recommendation Algorithm (QRA). Like many other social networking and Q&A sites, Quora uses a recommendation algorithm—herein dubbed QRA—to organize the user experience and the kinds of threads users see on their individualized homepages [120]. In other words, the QRA determines what posts appear on a given users' homepage – what posts they see first, which posts they can see or cannot see at all. Moreover, the QRA learns to customize and recommend content based on a user's activity, e.g. search history and other activities on the platform. This is best illustrated by the following quote from a user on Quora:

> You will see everything after creating a profile for the first time, but the more answers you read, upvote and share, the more similar questions you will see.

5.1.2 Quora Stages. Whereas Quora has traditionally served as a Q&A threaded forum space, more recently a new feature was introduced which was dubbed "Stages." Through stages, users can create a "stage" for a group of users who are interested in common topics and perspectives. Initially, the opportunity for joining a stage was only available if a user was invited by the administrators of the stage. At present, all users can create new stages or join existing stages by sending join requests which are sometimes subject to the stage administrators' approval[9]. A user can also share an existing thread's link with the users in the stage. In other words, Quora stages are somewhat equivalent to subreddits or Facebook groups. Moreover, instead of posting directly to the BnQuora homepage, users can ask and answer questions within a stage. This feature is best described by this representative quote from a Quora user:

> [Stage] is a new feature where people have the opportunity to build a community based on their own interests and likes and dislikes. In a stage community, you can discuss topics of interest as well as collect different content related to specific topics of interest. ... Some of these stages are: Bengalis' *Baithaki Adda* (careless discussions of the Bengalis), Islam and Muslim lifestyle.

Using this feature users can participate in discussions within a group that is shifted away from the primary conversations on Quora, thus shifting these conversations from being more visible to less visible. Specifically, users will only see the content produced in a stage if they have already joined, or subscribed, to that stage. Each stage has its own administrative body, who are elected from its membership base.

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[9]https://qr.ae/pGPUXJ

5.1.3 The Be Nice, Be Respectful (BNBR) Policy. All posts on BnQuora are required to abide by the platform's "Be Nice, Be Respectful" (BNBR) policy, which is in place to ensure that the users treat each other with civility and respect[10]. Whereas this policy is in place, users point out that this policy is highly subjective, and its interpretation and implementation can vary from user to user, thread to thread, and stage to stage:

> It is understood that there is an application of a weapon called "Be Nice Be Respectful" (BNBR) policy. But which is not Nice or which is not Respectful, that judgment is relative.

5.1.4 Upvoting, Downvoting, and Reporting. Similar to some other digital platforms (e.g., Reddit, YouTube), BnQuora uses a voting-based rating system for the posts on its platform. Users who can view posts can express their positive and negative opinions about the posts by using upvotes and downvotes, respectively. Like Reddit, Quora deploys a computational formula whereby a post's visibility is determined by the ratio of upvotes and downvotes to determine the order in which it will be presented to users [41]. These voting mechanisms play an important role in fostering a sense of community in culturally diverse online spaces [79].

5.1.5 Moderation. BnQuora (like any other Quora forum) has a moderation team in place to govern the content posted to the platform. However, unlike other user-generated community spaces like Reddit, the moderation team of BnQuora is anonymous and invisible. Users expressed their frustration about the lack of transparency in moderation and moderators on the platform:

> I don't know who Quora moderators are, which country they live in, or what their religions are! But I want to say something to them. ... In fact, Quora moderation itself does not know when an answer will be deleted.

It is not clear to the users who the moderators are or what rules they are using to moderate the questions and answers being produced by the user community. Thus, moderators can see any user and their activities at any time but users cannot see the moderators.

5.2 Panoptic Performativity and Platform Identity on BnQuora

In online question and answer spaces like Quora, language becomes the primary mechanism through which people perform their identities. Whereas BnQuora was designed to support conversations and connections amongst an ethnolinguistic identity category, the analysis of our data highlights the ways in which the broader systems of governance within the platform come together to marginalize the very identity the platform supports. Specifically, the various sociotechnical mechanisms that govern people's interactions on the platform give rise to a platform identity—certain identities and identity performances are normalized whereas others are marginalized. We illustrate this through the themes of: (1) moderators as prison guards, (2) collective surveillance as enforcing a majority identity, (3) algorithmic coloniality, and (4) staging as self-imprisonment.

5.2.1 Moderators as Prison Guards: Surveillance as Privileging. Moderators play a primary role in shaping the norms, and thus the identity, of an online community. Whereas moderators have been described as custodians of the Internet [44] who cleanse the online spaces they govern of harmful content, on BnQuora, the users perceive that moderators are actively privileging certain identities over others. Users with diverse identities raised similar concerns, as they perceive their respective group identities to be marginalized through the practices of moderation. Here, an Indian user expresses their perception of moderation to be biased towards the Bangladeshi users:

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[10]https://help.quora.com/hc/en-us/articles/360000470706-What-is-Quora-s-Be-Nice-Be-Respectful-policy

> But as long as such answers continue to be deleted, I will assume that Quora moderation is biased towards Bangladesh and its one special community, which is very sad.

Specifically, moderation practices are shaped by coloniality in that moderators come to re-enforce existing power structures in the region that privilege the dominant national and religious (in this case, often Indian and Hindu) identities over the others in the region. Though Bengali is the native language of Bangladesh and some Indian states, as previously described there are subtle differences in the ways they speak or write the language. For example, certain words have multiple synonyms in Bengali and people in Bangladesh and India use different synonyms in their respective countries more widely than the other. For example, the word "water" has two translations in Bengali:"jol" (জল) and "pani" (পানি). People in Bangladesh typically use the word "pani" whereas its synonym "jol" is more popularly used in India. Importantly, these two synonyms are often associated with different religious groups where "jol" and "pani" are used widely in Hindu and Muslim households, respectively. In the conversational threads on BnQuora, we observed a user who asked the following question:

> "How can I recognize a bottle of safe drinking water?".

In writing this question, this user used the word "pani" to refer to water, which is also associated with Muslim households. After writing the question, the moderators on BnQuora replaced the word with its synonym "jol". In the thread that followed, the original poster objected to the edit, and this disruption served as an opportunity for reflection whereby the users started to question the moderator's collective national and religious identities, and the identity of the platform at large. This is best illustrated through the following exchange:

> **Q**: In the question, it was written "pani", it was edited as "jol". What is the problem in writing "pani" in Bengali Quora?
> **P1**: I think it could be because the controllers of Quora are Indian. Don't know exactly though. Because in India it is called "jol". ... It is disrespectful to the questioner.

Here, the original poster asked for a rationale for why their post was edited, and other users participated in a conversation through which they were trying to understand how their posts were being governed. In this case, the users assumed that Quora moderators (or as P1 calls them "controllers") are from India and thus prioritized the synonym which is used more widely in India. Thus, according to P1, this editing was a reflection of the preference of the Indian controllers'—which are akin to prison guards as per Foucault's panopticon—who were normalizing an Indian style of Bengali writing on BnQuora. On a broad level, this example illustrates how users of BnQuora often use writing styles and language choices as a mechanism for determining the national and religious identities of other users.

Beyond linguistic variations among the Bengali people, they also practice different religions. Currently, the number of Bengalis who practice Hinduism and Islam are both substantial. Yet, many of the Muslim users of BnQuora have claimed that the moderation of the Q&A threads has made them feel invisible:

> No one can avoid the fact that Quora moderation does not delay even a minute in hiding the posts from Muslims if they bring up something about other religions. On the Q&A threads that hurt Islam, even if it is commented on, [the comment] is hidden.

Here, the user is expressing their perceived discrimination on the platform. According to their experience, in a comparative discussion among Islam and other religions, a post from an Islamic point of view is deleted, whereas the threads from the points of views of other religions, when they are hurtful towards Muslims, are not hidden. Rather, the complains from those who identify

as Muslim are removed instead. In this way, the platform comes to exhibit an identity that gives preference to certain religions while pushing other religions to the margins.

In the absence of transparency and feedback about the moderation decisions, users continue to reflect on the moderator's collective national and religious identities:

> With the overwhelming majority of Indian moderators in Quora, they seemed to be a little more arrogant or autocrat-like. ... They enjoy attacking believers of different religions.

Essentially, it becomes a question of representation. Many BnQuora users speculate that the moderators, the intermediaries between the Quora platform authority and its users, are often Indians who privilege the users whose identities reflect their own. Moreover, several users engage in political discourses to learn about other people's views and perspectives. Yet, several Bangladeshi users claimed that their posts were removed for criticizing Indian political views:

> Is Bengali Quora rapidly losing Bangladeshi users due to pro-India censorship?

Thus, the users who perceive a discrimination against themselves disassociate themselves with the platform by becoming inactive on the platform and do not contribute to the discussions. It reinforces the communal division, distrust, and the lack of cooperation among people in the region that was initially sewn by colonial practices and policies. The moderators on BnQuora often do not provide transparent justification for their moderation work which in this case had led many users to infer the moderators' identities and generalize those identities to the platform's identity. Taken together, through people's performances on BnQuora, their experiences with moderation illustrate a platform identity that privileges certain performances and marginalizes others.

5.2.2 Collective Surveillance as Enforcing a Majority Identity. Beyond the ways in which moderators are surveilling and shaping people's performances of identity on BnQuora, our findings also highlight the ways in which the users of BnQuora also work to collectively police, or surveil, people's linguistic performances in a way that gives power to certain identities and marginalizes others. Here, we highlight two primary mechanisms of collective surveillance: (1) voting as erasure and (2) hierarchical monitoring.

Voting as erasure. Much like Reddit where upvoting and downvoting can serve to re-enforce the values and perspectives of the majority user population [42], we also find that upvoting and downvoting served as community mechanisms that systemically normalized and privileged certain identities while marginalizing others.

Given that upvoting and downvoting contribute to what posts become more or less visible, users of BnQuora observed first-hand how the community itself was shaping the visibility of posts:

> Like the real world, the majority is dominating here. People who are the majority about an opinion here are downvoting, reporting and upvoting the others' opinions in order to establish their own opinion. Everyone's freedom of speech is being protected just like the real world! The difference in the number of active users is being revealed through downvotes and reports.

Although upvoting and downvoting often reflected people's personal biases and prejudices, moderators of BnQuora use post visibility to make decisions on which posts to promote or delete altogether:

> I've seen you will create some well wishers on Quora as well as a bunch of enemies. They will vote down your answer just because they do not like you. And Quora moderation will also delete the answer by looking at the number of downvotes without reading the answer.

Thus, sociotechnical artifacts like upvotes and downvotes act as forms of collective surveillance that serve to reinforce power and hegemony in digital platforms. As expressed by this user, freedom of expression is only being reserved for those whose linguistic performances were aligned with the normative logics of the dominant majority of users. For those whose performances did not align, their identities could be erased from the platform altogether.

Even when posts received the largest number of upvotes, if those posts went against the platform's identity, moderators also removed them:

> ... Moderators of BnQuora were hurt by that answer. Though my answer received the highest number of upvotes, they took it down to save their faces, but they did not remove the question. Then, I realized that BnQuora is not Bangladeshi, rather Indian, as if [the platform] has a nationality.

Here, the user is reflecting upon their experience about a previous post. In response to someone's question of "Why do Bangladeshis who never have come to India and do not understand things correctly, comment randomly?", the user replied that "there were some people in both Bangladesh and India who have such mentality and such Indians also comment about Bangladesh without proper understanding or knowledge." When this post was removed, this signaled to the user that the platform itself had a "nationality", and that user posts that did not conform to that platform's identity were subject to erasure.

Hierarchical Monitoring. Whereas we previously described the ways in which users were normalizing the kinds of performances on the platform through their voting behavior, this kind of activity is part of a broader system of collective policing that we conceptualize as hierarchical monitoring. Each individual who is part of this sociotechnical system plays a role in monitoring and regulating the behaviors of others. This is best illustrated by the following quote:

> I am writing anonymously, but some "detectives" will closely analyze my writing and find out my identity.

Beyond the voting behavior that can lead to the erasure of certain performances that go against the platform's identity, as part of hierarchical monitoring users are also regulating the kinds of language used in Q&A threads. Only here, users are collectively working to shape people's performance through harassment and ridicule. For example, as previously described, there are certain differences in the writing styles and dialects of Bengali languages among different regions of Bangladesh and India. Specifically in Bengal (Bangladesh and West Bengal), being a densely populated country, this variation is more noticeable. This is best articulated by the following quote:

> "In Bangladesh, the dialect varies, as the distance varies from 40-45 km."

The users on BnQuora recognize this phenomenon. The Bangladeshi dialects can be easily recognized as "different" by the Indian Bengalis. Here, this user is referring to those differences in writing styles and explaining how their writing style can be a lens through which the anonymous moderators can monitor them based on their "extrapolated" identities. Some users have shared their experiences of writing on BnQuora using the phonetic spellings of their regional dialects and being criticized for that. As expressed by the following user:

> Different regions of Bangladesh have different [dialects]. Many people post some ridiculous answers and comments about the languages/dialects of other regions. It is very annoying to me.

Users on BnQuora have tried to understand the motivations behind such derogatory or disapproving attitudes towards the Bengali language's Bangladeshi dialects. Some users have concluded that this attitude is rooted in the sociohistoric perception of the subcontinent. One such crucial milestone in history was the postcolonial partition of 1947. As Bengal was used as a site of partition,

both East and West Bengal faced a huge refugee crisis. The refugees from rural East Bengal/East Pakistan (modern-day Bangladesh) being addressed as "Bangals" as a form of harassment:

> The main reason for this belittling may be the oral language, the rural customs of East Bengal. ... The word [Bangal] may have become a symbol of bitter opposition when the stream of helpless people from East Pakistan, after the partition of the country, who were occupying vacant lands, gardens, etc., in Kolkata and other districts. Everyone from East Pakistan has this label in the post-1947 period.

Similarly, the users' views towards their history of colonial subjugation and its impacts also influence how Bangladeshi and Indian users view the concept of adopting foreign words in their writing. We found that the Bangladeshi writing style accepts using widely used foreign words (e.g., Arabic, Persian) in Bengali writing, while the Indian writing standard is more conservative in that regard. An Indian[11] user expressed their denunciation towards this liberal adoption of foreign words by the Bangladeshi Bengalis saying,

> ... Now let's talk about my dislike. ... Bangladesh is the country of Bengali language, the country of sacrificing life for language. I personally do not like the use of many Arabic, Persian and Urdu words in Bengali in that country.

In that discussion, the Indian users discouraged the adoption of words from foreign languages, viewing those as external influences on the Bengali language. These experiences are deeply rooted in coloniality, where religious identity became correlated with social status in Bengal. Similarly on BnQuora, the use of certain words that have come to be associated with specific national or religious identities provides linguistic cues for a users' perceived "Bangladeshiness" and "Indian-ness", or "Hinduness" or "Muslimness". This relates to Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, where users are harassing those whose language use is a product of coloniality. Through this hierarchical monitoring of the linguistic choices being made by others, people are collectively working to admonish those whose performances counter the platform's identity.

We also see this hierarchical monitoring taking place through tagging, which is one of the features of Quora. Users can assign different tags (e.g. keywords and phrases) to the Q&A threads, where the tags are community generated and used to identify the primary topics covered in any particular thread. Quora creates a page for each of those topic tags to aggregate all the threads using that tag. Through the use of tagging, members of BnQuora are collectively working to create a platform identity that establishes certain performances as normative and marginalizes others.

One of the primary pages on BnQuora centers around the topic of the "Bengali (people)." As part of the page the users have include an image to best represent the topic, where for this particular topic the chosen image was a map of the Indian state West Bengal. Such practices make the default representation of Bengali people on BnQuora to be synonymous with the Indian Bengalis while marginalizing Bangladeshi Bengalis. In other words, Indian Bengali representation becomes the normalized representation of Bengali people. As described by a user:

> Why is only an image of West Bengal's map as the picture of the 'Bengali' topic in Quora? Don't Bengalis live in Bangladesh?

5.2.3 Algorithmic Coloniality. As previously described, through the process of colonization, the Bengali people were separated geographically by religion as a way in which discord could be created and amplified in the region. As a reflection of the impacts of colonization, one of the primary conversational topics across the threads is religion. Given that many users expressed

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[11]We did not collect the users' information. We infer this user's national identity from the title of the thread where they were trying to answer the question: "As a Bengali from Kolkata (an Indian city), what makes you sad about the Bengalis of Bangladesh?"

adopting and subsequently engaging in conversational threads on BnQuora to learn about the experiences and perspectives of those who share the same ethnolinguistic identity, our analysis identified several threads where users were complaining about how the majority of threads being recommended to them by the QRA were focused on problematic and divisive topics like religion. As explained by the following user:

> Why is there nothing in Bengali Quora except religion and caste? You may be new to Quora! (If I am not wrong). Quora promotes the most viewed/popular and controversial topics in newcomer feeds. It is automated from Quora's system.

By promoting controversial Q&A threads that focus on religion, the algorithm also comes to exhibit a kind of coloniality—what we dub algorithmic coloniality. In this view, the algorithm is promoting and thus continuing to amplify conversations around features of people's identities that have sewn discord for decades. When these threads are promoted to new users, those threads can seed a new users' initial activities and set the stage for a user's subsequent interactions and experiences with the platform.

Moreover, users described how the QRA learns about people and works to identify them. This relates to Cheney-Lippold's [15] concept of algorithmic identity, wherein he argues that algorithms process data to measure certain features about us, such as our race and religion. Such use of quantification and statistical accounts of the world as a tool was one of the characteristics of colonial rule. For example, Herbert Risley, a colonial government official, attempted to understand the racial origins and castes of the people in Bengal (e.g., Indo-Iranian[12], Dravidian, and Mongoloid) based on the people's physical attributes (e.g., nasal index and skull width) which are heavily critiqued by modern day scholars [37, 89]. In the context of computing, Dourish and Mainwaring have identified similar commitments to reductionist quantitative measures for understanding, evaluation, and prediction as the "colonial impulse" of ubiquitous computing [28]. Only in the context of BnQuora, users express that the platform's primary identity centers around religion:

> No matter how successful and enterprising you are in your own [professional] field - you have only one identity in Bengali Quora - Hindu or Muslim.

Thus, the QRA is prioritizing users' religious identities and personalizing their experience on the platform around that one identity. To draw on some historic context, in the British organized municipal elections during the last decades of the Raj, Muslims could only vote for other Muslims, and Hindus for Hindus [51]. Much like how the colonial rulers crudely generalized the diverse population of the subcontinent, the algorithm exhibits a kind of coloniality in that it shifts people's focus from the myriad topics they can discuss and enforces a platform identity centered around religious discord and highlighting differences amongst members of the community.

5.2.4 Staging as Self-Imprisonment: From Visibility to Less Visibility. Due to how the QRA promotes communally divisive threads to its user population and the ways in which several members were being marginalized, BnQuora recently launched a feature called "stage" as a solution to such conflicts. Through their use of stages, users of BnQuora can engage in conversation with like-minded others in a less surveilled, but far less visible space. Yet, the use of stages can also be seen as a way to strengthen the platform's identity. That is, as users with non-normative identities or who wish to engage in non-normative conversations confine themselves within those stages, this creates a kind of platform purity within the primary conversational spaces on BnQuora. As expressed by the following user:

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[12]Because of use of atrocities committed in the name of the Aryan race by the Nazis, academics encourage replacing this term with "Indo-Iranian" [119]

> The announcement of the launch of the stage is a new, very good initiative. It is a new feature where people have the opportunity to build a community based on their own interests and likes and dislikes. In a "stage" community, you can discuss topics of interest and collect different content related to specific topics of interest ... Now, you can find the space of your choice and share knowledge. We hope that we will not have to look at any extremist questions, Islamophobia, etc.

This user had experienced extremism and Islamophobia on BnQuora earlier. After the introduction of the stage feature, such users approach stages as a less visible space where they would be subject to less monitoring. Therefore, the users who find themselves marginalized can confine themselves within stages while discussing their religious identity and practices. Whereas in the context of marginalized identities, finding safety is important [29], in other cases staging can work to further polarize an online space (e.g. for those engaging in political conversations) or serve to make non-normative identities less visible or even invisible.

Foucault described that the individuals who break laws in society do not cease to exist. Rather, they are removed from society within the arrangement of prisons [35]. Similarly, for those users whose identities are marginalized by BnQuora's platform identity, moving to stages is a kind of self-imprisonment wherein they can engage in discourses with a homogenous group. They do not cease to exist, but are relegated to an alternative space that will not challenge the platform's normative identity.

6 DISCUSSION

BnQuora offers an intriguing place to explore how sociotechnical systems may reproduce colonial structures that shape people's identity performances. Studies have shown how online platforms such as Quora can host a large volume of discussions on regional issues when they are operated in local languages [19, 111]. From this point of view, the launch of Quora in Bengali seems to be a benevolent attempt on the part of the platform designers for creating a more accessible space for the Bengali speaking users. The online platform Quora that runs in English for an international user group and its Bengali counterpart, BnQuora for the Bengali speaking users alone have similar features and scaffolds. The only difference between Quora and Bengali Quora is the languages of communication on these platforms. The setup and the structure of the platform does not regard the social, political, cultural, and historic background of the Bengali people and their language. Thus, the platform appears to impose a colonial "notion of universality" [28] across platforms of different languages.

But, BnQuora does not bring together one coherent group. It pools different communities with a shared language and a colonial history anchored in a range of temporal horizons, discourse practices, national and religious identities. The Quora recommendation algorithm (QRA) in combination with the upvote and downvote features appear to amplify some of these distinctions. According to several users the recommendation algorithm on Bengali Quora considers participants either Hindus or Muslims – divided on a religious spectrum, above everything else. These divisions tend to emerge on controversial Q&A threads and subsequently promoted by the algorithm to create greater online traffic and user engagement.

Understanding what happens to these distinctions on the platform becomes important if we hope to comprehend the role of sociotechnical systems in reproducing colonial structures that shape people's identities. The combination of a performative approach to language use and identity expression with Foucault's notion of panopticon offers a dynamic perspective.

The participants' identity performances play out on a platform which promotes both visibility and invisibility. Much like Foucault's depiction of the panopticon, participants' posts are exposed,
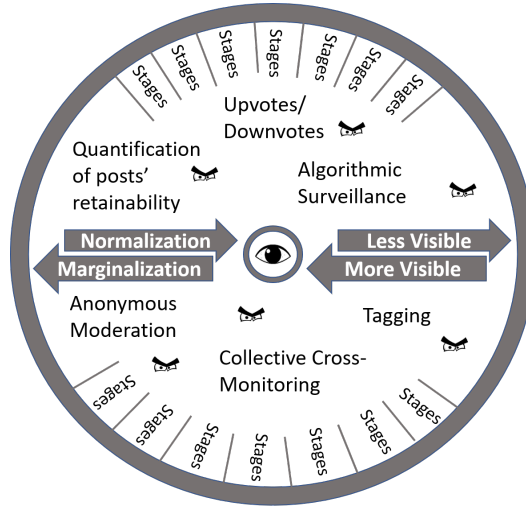
Fig. 2. Panoptic Platform depiction of BnQuora.

visible to all while moderators are hidden behind a curtain of anonymity (see Figure 2). This creates a sense of surveillance among some participants, and in particular, those who are exposed to anonymous moderation practices that erased or changed their posts.

In contrast to Foucault's prison, poky cells do not define the BnQuora platform. Free to roam, participants can contribute to any discussion they please. When a user does not behave according to platform norms, they usually do not receive any conclusive or tangible punishments like getting banned, or having their account disabled. Rather, the anonymous moderators limit the visibility of such users' posts. Thus, invisibility becomes a form of punishment for not conforming to the established platform norms and identity. BNBR policies remain vague, giving participants little concrete guidance on what falls within or outside social norms of a heterogeneous Bengali community. Other participants likewise police the forums and can tag, upvote, downvote or report posts as they see fit which creates a majoritarianism on this platform. The readings and voting practices by the community gets amplified by a recommendation algorithm. Popular posts gain more visibility while performances not matching the interest by the majority get pushed to the margins and become less and less visible. The majority gradually crowds out minority performances through this process of collective cross-monitoring, upvotes/downvotes and quantification of posts' retainability. In other words, the recommendation algorithm on Quora further accelerates these centrifugal and centripetal forces – bringing the normalized identities to a position of higher visibility while pushing the marginalized groups to positions of lesser visibility (see Figure 2).

The linguistic identity that initially brought together a range of discourse practices, temporal horizons, national and religious identities slowly purges minority performances or pushes them to the margins. Or, feeling the centrifugal push towards invisibility participants are given the choice to create their own marginal stages out of the majority's sight. Here, participants can freely exercise their preferred discourse practice, national and religious identity and interpret decolonization based on the temporal horizon they see fit. The platform does not become the arena for a shared decolonization debate and narrative but one normalizing the majority identity and, in the process, marginalizing minority identities.

The data that we collected and analyzed from BnQuora in this paper helped us understand the users' perception about the emerging platform. That they were able to join this platform and voice

their frustrations about perceived moderation biases showed that they were not completely powerless. HCI research that looks through a postcolonial computing lens tends often to either overlook or exaggerate this agency of the users [67]. These agencies can be both constructive and destructive. For example, as the "stage" feature was introduced to BnQuora, the users could create and decide to join different stages according to their choices to engage in discussions with more similar minded users. One the one hand, this created a more intimate space potentially improving the potentiality of that online space for marginalized identities. On the other hand, certain groups felt confined within the boundaries of stages which further marginalizes those identities and increases the risk of segregation. With majority views dominating the major discussion forums, users with different perspectives get pushed into smaller echo-chambers. The exchange of perspective on the platform looses out. This not only fails Quora's objective of understanding each other better, but also increases the possibility of ideological polarization on the platform.

7 CONCLUSION

Though sociotechnical systems like online platforms can support identity performances and expression amongst marginalized populations, these spaces are also known to reinforce harmful ideologies and hegemonic values through various sociotechnical mechanisms. During this process of normalizing certain identities, the platform marginalizes other groups of users manifesting a certain platform identity. In this paper, we focus on the experiences of the users of BnQuora and how this platform exhibits coloniality. By bringing in Judith Butler's concept of performativity, we demonstrate how language makes identities subject to surveillance. Our study highlights the role of human actors (e.g., moderation, majority user groups) and technical actors (e.g., upvotes, downvotes, stages) in the governance and determination of visibility on the platform in different scales. We will also continue to explore in future how we can use different sociological theories and lenses (e.g., studies on community belonging) to make sense of our data and interactions on BnQuora. In our future work, we will explore how the politics of algorithms continues to exacerbate the marginalization of identities in online spaces and how sociotechnical systems like Quora can support the identity work of marginalized communities such as the Bengali population.

8 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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