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Making a "Hate-Watch": Netflix's *Indian Matchmaking* and the Stickiness of "Cringe Binge TV"

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Abstract

Netflix's 2020 release *Indian Matchmaking* drew a massive backlash particularly from South Asian and diasporic audiences who felt it normalized the experiences associated with arranged marriages. Audiences took to the internet to express how much they loved hating the show but at the same time also continued to obsessively watch despite their reservations. My paper takes up this paradox of simultaneously loving and hating a media product. By drawing from interviews with the showrunner, members of the production team and a close reading of the show's texts and paratexts, I argue that "hatewatching" or "cringe-binge" as a mode of spectatorship only seems an oppositional form of viewing or an act of resistance to the reification of dominant hegemonic values. Far from being a function of spectatorial agency, I demonstrate how the platforms utilize "hatewatching" as a lucrative form of viewership and consumer habit to cultivate stickiness for their content.

Keywords

"hate watch,", "cringe,", binge, oppositional viewing, affect, reality-TV, docu-series, *Indian Matchmaking*, *A Suitable Girl*, Smriti Mundhra, stickiness, community engagement, attention economy

Introduction

Arranged marriage as a South Asian cultural phenomenon continues to be a cornerstone of the marriage industry in the subcontinent despite its regressive traditionalisms

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and perpetuation of gender and caste inequalities.[1] At the same time, matchmaking in India and the Indian diaspora is also an unpopular and controversial practice. Accordingly the reality show *Indian Matchmaking* is mired in controversy precisely because it taps into the millennial discomfort surrounding the social practice. Yet despite being vocal of their disapproval and downright hatred of the show, South Asian and diasporic audiences "binge watched" it in its entirety, leading to the show being labeled a "hate-watch" or "cringe-binge" by its South Asian audience. The showrunner anticipated this controversy and having interviewed her and writing in the aftermath, I undertake two tasks in this essay.[2] I develop a conceptual framework to understand cringe as a warble of contradictory emotions of loving and loathing at the same time. I, then, show how far from being a form of oppositional viewing, this love for loathing is actively cultivated by the platform economy as a form of stickiness and increased audience engagement with the IP (Intellectual Property).

The object of cringe evokes discomfort, even rage in the South Asian viewer, but at the same time also a simultaneous willingness (almost pleasure) of engagement, instead of repulsion. Thus, my paper asks the question—how does an object that inspires hatred and revulsion, instead of turning us away, manages to have our absolute and undivided cathectic investment? While platforms and creative industries manufacture stickiness by making content "spreadable," a cultural text such as *Indian Matchmaking* actively encourages a peculiar form of hatred and/or deep revulsion toward the show.[3] A columnist based in India admits—"I consumed it in a day, gaping in equal part investment and irreverence."[4] Similarly, Indian-American actress Poorna Jagannathan, who stars in another Netflix South Asian themed show *Never Have I Ever* (2020–present), tweeted: "Indian Matchmaking was horrifying. Also, Netflix, how soon can you drop season 2 (asking for a friend)."[5] This cultural commentary indicates such ironic viewings, of simultaneously loving and loathing the show; my essay addresses how these affects accumulate within the material, cultural, and industrial context in which *Indian Matchmaking* was packaged as a reality show. Despite having been conceived to spark progressive conversations, the show underwent a genre repurposing and was ultimately understood as "trash TV." This process is what my paper demonstrates and my analysis rests on the interviews I conducted with the showrunner and members of the production team. But my arguments also draw from a close textual reading of the show's narratives, esthetics and paratexts along with a comparative textual analysis with the showrunner's earlier independently produced documentary work *A Suitable Girl* (2017).

So Bad, it's Good: The Cultural Politics of Contradictory Emotions

Ordinarily, we would think of "hate" as an affect that deters the viewer instead of engaging them but there has been many instances in pop-cultural industry history where consumers have gravitated toward content they actively dislike. A number of neologisms in the *Urban Dictionary* register the phenomenon of viral videos and

media content that audiences love to hate. The terms—"trash TV," "hate watch," "cringe binge," "eye-roll TV"—classify media that consumers watch precisely to hate. Thus, "hatewatching" is by no means a novelty; in fact Gray (2019) places "hatewatching" within the larger constellation of anti-fandom and trash TV. He uses the terms "monitorial hatewatching" and "visceral hatewatching" to locate instances "in which the hatewatcher feels as though he or she must watch" and where "we just want to feel, even if that feeling is anger, annoyance, or dislike" (Gray 2019, 36–7).

Marxist criticism theorizes hate as a force with political utility that can be mobilized against the bourgeoise (Lukács 1971). Ahmed (2003) talks about it as a powerful but unstable force of cohesion associated with racism and nationhood. What Ahmed (2003) offers us is "a theory of passion not as the drive to accumulate (whether it be value, power or meaning), but as that which is accumulated over time" (p. 45). Hate, for Ahmed, does not begin and end at the originary point within the object or even the subject who she says is but a nodal point in the circulation of hatred, but rather it ripples and reverberates across past associations. In the context of the show's reception, this is echoed in the words of another Indian columnist who says the show "glosses over the mental scars that come with being treated like chattel."[6] The show, thus, acts as a nodal point in the hatred, discomfort and feelings of cringe that circulates around matchmaking as (an often dehumanizing) practice and a cultural institution. Ahmed similarly notes, in her case study of a British anti-immigrant pamphlet, how hate travels backwards and reopens past associations that have accumulated over time. In this case what is historically accumulated over time is the shared sense of collective trauma that the marriage industry in South Asia represents for some. Hatred toward the institution of matchmaking and arranged marriage gets re-opened viscerally through a show like *Indian Matchmaking*. This cultural response aligns "the particular with the general" (Ahmed 2003, 49) where the particular (that is the show) comes to stand in for the general (matchmaking as a collective lived experience).

Both Lukács and Ahmed understand hate as a clarion call for action, often an action against those sets of past associations and wrongs. In Ahmed's study, the anti-immigrant pamphlet implicitly urges the British citizen to take action, to act, driven by hatred. Although of a wildly different nature and not nearly as damaging as a genocidal pamphlet, the hatred that the Indian or diasporic viewer experiences with *Indian Matchmaking* also implicitly provokes its viewers to act. But the activity it provokes is primarily discursive—an unremitting compulsion *to talk* about just how much one hates the show. This compulsion marks the show's success commercially in a creative industry that strives to rouse the viewer into activity, into talking about their hatred of the show, be it on social media or on opinion pieces in news websites. Hatred, according to Ahmed (2003), entails an attachment to an object, "a form of intimacy" (p. 50). It compels you to have an opinion and engage in the active act of *opining* about how the show makes you feel.

Gilbert (2019, 71) writes—"Put briefly, hatewatching represents a mode of viewing behavior in which the personal use-value of the television text itself is of secondary importance to the exchange-value of performing a stance—critical and derisive—toward that text for others." In hatewatching, desire is satisfied not with the viewing of the film or the show (which is associated with use-value in Marxism), but by the

performance of a certain position and articulation of hate toward it. Yet, by performing the hatred felt for the show and the institution through discursivity and active participation actively, the viewer contributes to making *Indian Matchmaking* an infectious and sticky trending topic on social media. Alexander (2017) writes—"[w]hen we binge watch a series on Netflix, we produce value in several simultaneous and oft-ignored ways: we establish ourselves as 'cultural citizens,' to use Toby Miller's useful term invoking the interrelations between consumerism and citizenship" (p. 21).

Hermes (2005) and Andrejevic (2004) talk about how viewers of reality TV, in particular, often position themselves as critical viewers and define themselves in opposition to the show and its characters. Performative hate watching that has largely been understood as oppositional is not necessarily so anymore. In one way it fulfils the desire for fan (or anti-fan) interactivity and affect that the creative industries increasingly strive to attain to become commercially successful.[7] Andrejevic (2011) uses the terms "emotional capital" and "affective surfeit" to talk about how affect, as a form of capital, can produce surplus through its accumulation and resourcing. Affect, as Ahmed (2003) points out, is sticky. Rather than an inherent attribute of an object, affect sticks to those objects and circulates. The stickiness of affect grounds my understanding of the audience response to *Indian Matchmaking*. In the account that follows, I will show how as a show Indian Matchmaking comes to acquire affective surfeit through strategies of distribution, advertisement and paratextual framing, rather than it being an intrinsic quality of the show. Thus, affect is not just harvested and resourced by capital but also is an adhesive force modulated and managed by it. Clough (2009) writes that "the probabilistic measuring of sociological methodology shifts from merely representing populations, even making populations, to modulating or manipulating the population's affective capacities" (p. 52). Affect can thus be turned into a function and feature of socio-economic behavior around which emotion can be appropriated by the logic of socio-economic exchange and social relations.

"Hate" sticks to the show *Indian Matchmaking*, contrived by the regime that produces or decodes meaning, rather than the audience that encodes or derives it. In other words, hatewatching *Indian Matchmaking* is not a radical, against the grain reading of a media message, using what Stuart Hall (1991) calls an "oppositional code." In his essay "Encoding/Decoding," Hall challenges the prevalent model of communication studies and provides us with three hypothetical modes or positions from which a media message is viewed or interpreted—the dominant hegemonic code, the negotiated code, and the oppositional code. bell hooks applies Stuart Hall's idea of the oppositional code to understand the critical and interrogating gaze with which Black Americans view the mainstream media messages on television. While this remains a defining characteristic of black spectatorship in the United States, scholars have also demonstrated other ways in which dominant readings of characters can be challenged with against the grain or oppositional modes of seeing. One such case in point is Imelda Whelehan reading of the character of Hannah Horvath in HBO show *Girls* (2012–2017). Despite the dominant audience tendencies of hating Hannah, the character for Whelehan (2017), challenges the stock postfeminist trope of women celebrating "female friendships as nurturant and supportive" (p. 32).

There are similar echoes in the audience reception of the persona of Aparna Shewakramani in Indian Matchmaking where she was simultaneously hate-watched first only to be celebrated later as a non-conformist. Irrespective of whether Aparna's persona is conformist or not, this form of polarized reaction to characters contributes to achieving the sought after marketing goal of media content because it intensifies what in marketing parlance is known as "audience engagement." *Indian Matchmaking* anticipates this oppositional code of hate, anger, revulsion, and belittling to command the affective surfeit of South Asian and diasporic audiences who are invested in the show albeit in a way *they think* is oppositional. This is an instance of media consumerism's extractive apparatus subsuming oppositional or contrarian modes of viewings and domains that previously resisted indoctrination and control. Instead of functioning as resistance, oppositional viewing or hatewatching is translated as quantifiable units of audience engagement that—firstly, validates the media content as a popular and commercially successful one, and secondly, helps it become even more popular and more commercially successful by acquiring traction through public discourse. In other words, it functions on social media as an eye-ball grabber instead of a critique.

Particularly in the platform era, this extraction of affective surfeit becomes easier with the increasing vertical integration of services. Of the platform, Lobato (2019) says, the most distinguishing feature is "the specific way in which they have been able to harness user communication and labor" (p. 36). But unlike Twitter or Facebook, Netflix is not a user-generated content platform. Yet, Srnicek's work shows that Product Platforms despite having an operational rationale distinct from a user-generated content platform (or as he calls them Advertisement platforms) are still reliant on data. This partly stems from Product Platforms' transformative "goods as a service" model under which goods are no longer sold but rather leased out on a contractual basis. Instead of buying a DVD (which is a good) of *Indian Matchmaking*, Netflix will allow me to access and watch it if I pay a monthly subscription fee (like a service). In this regard the "raw material of data remains central to this [Product] platform" inorder for it to render "better service" and "[block] out competitors in securing a competitive advantage" (Srnicek 2016, 74).

While legacy media has always historically been preoccupied with a measurement of the social in terms of television rating points or box office numbers to assess what can be monetized with greater efficiency, the algorithmic tools of measurement at the disposal of platforms like YouTube and Netflix are able to supposedly produce more nuanced, "accurate" and complex understandings of audience measurement. This has resulted in a hitherto impossible deep foray into the "social" and increasingly more "efficient" assessments of the attention economy. van Dijck (2013) writes "attention is no longer the product of (semi-) independent ratings firms that measure how many eyeballs a program attracts every minute; instead, attention is measured by the very systems that also produce and distribute content, organize and rank a video's display, connect ads to content, and attune the algorithms that connect content to advertisers" (p. 125). As a result, Pilipets (2019) writes, "the platform's experience design plays out in a shift from 'couch-potato' behavior to binge-watching as a deliberate mode of active participation" (p. 5).

The binary opposition of NoCal versus SoCal is often invoked to understand this transition from the legacy media companies of Southern California to the tech companies of Northern California like YouTube and Netflix. Cunningham and Craig (2019) write—"'NoCal' business culture deploys information technology strategies, embraces aggressive disruption, and values rapid prototyping and iteration, 'permanent beta,' advanced measurement, and 'programmatics.' For its part, 'SoCal' business culture is embodied in established screen media, that is, Hollywood, the major broadcasters, and cable interests, with their time- honored business models of talent- driven mass media and premium content and limited recourse to measurement techniques that are decades old" (p. 22). A fundamental feature of the NoCal business model is to build a user base through community engagement which makes these companies more invested in the "social" than their SoCal counterparts. Cunningham and Craig (2019) explain how "'community engagement' and meaningful participation have the potential to generate greater value," as these platforms employ a range of diverse strategies "in the development, production, and circulation of content in social media, including knowing when and where audiences want it and its relevance to multiple audiences, as well as its frequency" (p. 78).

Though these strategies of community engagement and arrays of precision analytical measurement were the mainstay of YouTube, the platform remains to this day, "a gigantic grab-bag of content of enormous variety, and so 'fails' the traditional TV network threshold tests for stabilized, filtered content" (Cunningham and Silver 2013, 76). This is because YouTube is largely a user generated content platform (UGC) that despite its experimentations with other business models sees itself as an incubator for "next-gen" content creators. But where YouTube has failed to successfully capture the drawing room and mount a challenge to the television and the film industries, Netflix, with its more "advanced" and complex audience analytics has succeeded by fusing NoCal and SoCal strategies (Cunningham and Craig 2019, 49). This fusion is most manifest in the particular form of attention economy and participative culture that Netflix now employs[8] where the audience subject is immersed in a serial pattern of user engagement that is called "bingeing." Pilipets (2019) writes—"The platform employs its algorithms in a captivating way to hold user attention for longer than one episode. By extracting data from our browsing, playing, searching, and scrolling behavior, Netflix captures each form of contact with its interface in order to provide more data for its recommendations" (p. 3). The Netflix platform's technological affordance strives to always prolong user interaction by displaying a seemingly endless catalog of potentially streamable content feed, auto-playing next episodes or skipping intros. These forms of "scripted interactivities" (Chamberlain 2011) are ways in which platforms inculcate newer kinds of "habits" that, to use Chun and Kyong's (2017) words "render past contingent repetitions into anticipable connections" (p. 54).

While Pilipets' work largely explores "active participation" in terms of brand attachment and playful forms of interactivity, it is not only through attachment, preference and love that platforms can extract value from our embodied engagements, opinion formation, and sharing practices. Stickiness, despite its "varying dynamics" or potential of "yield[ing] criticality" (Brophy 2019, 20) can extract value through active modes of hatewatching, feelings of "cringe" and vocal resentment. Hate, in this form,

is a willingness to engage in its object, an object that can stand in for a series of historical and cultural associations. But not just any object or cultural text can stand in for, or evoke that series of past associations in a way for it to elicit hateful cringe. *Indian Matchmaking* showrunner, Smriti Mundhra's earlier work *A Suitable Girl* (2017) had also dealt with the same theme of arranged marriage and matchmaking. Yet far from evoking cringe, it was understood as an exemplar of a social activist, "prestige" text containing within it a set of progressive values—the exact obverse of *Indian Matchmaking* which was made only two years later. Therefore, the object that substitutes or stands in for our general discomfort toward arranged marriage is something more than just a show *about* it. It must have the right set of audio-visual codes embedded in it that reopens the Indian/diasporic audience's shared cultural trauma of being "treated like chattel" while at the same time being engaging enough for it to be a conduit for channeling the hate that we feel toward such cultural memories. The show has to inculcate a different kind of hate imbued with ambivalence that draws the viewer in, instead of away, and have the consumer hooked for more than five hours of screen time, every minute of which they will hate.

The "active" consumption of "hatewatch shows" means that audiences will not just constantly go on consuming these shows but are also going to be vocal about expressing their hatred and discontent with it through social media and other outlets of platformed interaction. Evoking hate toward itself became the most crucial part of *Indian* Matchmaking's pervasive appeal. The general understanding, however, is that content creators seldom envision their creations as "hate watches."[9] Havas and Sulimma (2018) write—"cringe may also result from extratextual viewing positions not intended by either a show or its producers" (p. 86).[10] In the context of *Indian Matchmaking*, the distribution platform was much more in control of the desired effect and the marketing that would get them there.[11] But the question of "desired effect" itself is a complicated one in a cultural text of collective and collaborative authorship. By looking at how this show was created and then subsequently made available within a platform economy which values stickiness, we can arrive at a better understanding of how the affects of "hate-watching" and "cringe" get attached to it.

Indian Matchmaking According to Smriti Mundhra

Born and raised in LA, Smriti Mundhra, the showrunner of *Indian Matchmaking*, is a second-generation Indian American who got her MFA degree in Film from Columbia University. She graduated in 2009 in the midst of immense economic turmoil following the mortgage bubble burst. In her interview with me, she spoke of the economic feasibility of shooting documentaries at a time when it was difficult to finance a film. She had to wait nine years after graduating to earn any legitimate recognition, but she did so with *A Suitable Girl* (2017) which was a documentary on three young Indian women and their aspirations in the face of adverse cultural and familial pressures to get married. The film won her the Best New Documentary Director Award at the Tribeca Film Festival and was also screened at the British Film Institute Festival (Figure 1).

Figure 1. A Poster for *A Suitable Girl* directed by Sarita Khurana and Smriti Mundhra where one can see the emblem of Tribeca as a stamp of authenticity.

Despite their thematic similarities, *A Suitable Girl* and *Indian Matchmaking* have had wildly different critical receptions. In fact, Sima Taparia, the much-reviled protagonist and eponymous matchmaker of the show, plays the exact same role in *A Suitable Girl* where she is seen going through her infamous "chattel" database of prospective brides and grooms for the purpose of matchmaking (Figure 2). *A Suitable Girl* touches upon all the cultural aspects that audiences found to be "cringeworthy" in *Indian Matchmaking*—from the methodical process of setting up a match, meeting of the families, documenting their expectations with class, caste and physical appearance to the actual wedding ceremony. But while the former is largely recognized as a work of exceptional documentary work, the latter is seen as trashy reality tv, "problematic" and a "hate watch" that sensationalizes and spectacularizes marriage as a contest to be won or lost, even though by the end of the show, there was no clear indication as to whether the pairs survived or "won".

I would argue that the "genre" of *Indian Matchmaking* plays a key part in the show being received as a hatewatch. While the show has largely been understood as reality TV (Netflix certainly categorizes it under the label "reality show"), Mundhra, during her numerous public interviews calls it a "docu-series."[12] In my own interview with her, she somewhat dodges the question of genre but nevertheless insists that she was well aware of the fact that she was working on a show that had mass appeal.

Q. When you started filming did you envision this as a reality show or as a docu-series?

A. I definitely envisioned the show as having a mass appeal. I had made a documentary about the same topic already, and when you make something that's more serious, I guess you could say the audience is going to be somewhat limited. So that was a

Figure 2. A still from *A Suitable Girl* where the camera shifts from Sima Taparia (the matchmaker) conducting her business over the phone this piece of paper that she is holding in her hands which lists the suitable candidates for marriage with their physical details.

deliberate choice to make it, I guess you could say, frothy and glossy. [T]he one thing that I always think about, no matter what I'm doing is—to ask if it is saying something or is this just adding to the noise in the world? If it's adding to the noise in the world, I'm not interested. If it's actually saying something, if it's breaking some barrier or if it's an opportunity to explore a difficult topic, or you know kick the hornet's nest in some way, I'm interested. And that can happen in a documentary-reality hybrid show like *Indian Matchmaking* or can happen in a more serious independent documentary like a *Suitable Girl* or *St. Louis Superman*. Then in terms of the esthetics, I think we knew what we wanted it to be. I always think of what I make and if it is supposed to appeal to my film school colleagues or is it supposed to appeal to my cousins who have no patience. In that sense this was definitely a cousin show. I needed this to appeal to my cousins. The esthetics were a big part of that, we wanted to shoot big bright large formats, we wanted the background music to be fun and it had to appeal to people who wouldn't typically watch documentary.

During my interview with her, it became clear to me that what she really wanted was to create a more popular version of the documentary (i.e., *A Suitable Girl*) she had produced two years earlier—something that would be a "fun watch" but at the same time educating. But vocal diasporic and South Asian audiences and cultural commentators had either made up their mind about the show *without* watching it or had made up their minds *before* watching it, which accounts for the numerous "paranoid readings"[13] of it. The charge against the show, that of "normalizing" the process of matchmaking and of reducing the participants to a "bio-data," has been answered rather well by Mundhra herself in an interview where she says how reducing a person to a set of attributes or data points by a matchmaker is not very dissimilar to the way a dating app algorithm works.[14] So, in the subsequent sections, I do not attempt a more

conventional close textual reparative reading[15] of the show which would speculate on its supposedly restorative qualities. I'm instead interested in a different kind of reparative reading, not looking at the show itself, but rather at the complex intellectual investments and commercial expectations that condition it. What this will reveal is how the message of social responsibility with which the show was envisioned by an otherwise serious filmmaker well known in the film festival circuit, acquires new meaning in the platform's preoccupation with genre bending and repurposing.

Regardless of Mundhra's cogent articulation of the original creative vision behind the show, in the end, *Indian Matchmaking* became a reality show that, as another South Asian columnist puts it, champions arranged marriage with a casteist glee.[16] The show was, by and large, marketed as a reality show and its promotion showcased spectacle not "creative vision" or the intention to "spark a conversation" couched within it. Mittel (2001) writes that there are very "material ways in which genres are culturally defined, interpreted and evaluated" (p. 9). In the case of *Indian Matchmaking*, its generic identity markers and meaning are clearly contingent on its production, marketing, and framing. The subsequent sections of this essay demonstrate precisely the material conditions that heavily influences the show's interpretation and anticipates the hate that made it commercially successful. I make this argument by comparing the visual and esthetic style of *Indian Matchmaking* with Mundhra's 2017 documentary *A Suitable Girl*.

At first glance, the different affective engagements produced by *Indian Matchmaking* and *A Suitable Girl* are clearly evident in the way they were shot. *A Suitable Girl* employs documentary realism that comes from what Grierson (1933) calls the "creative treatment of actuality" (p. 7). This is supposedly in stark opposition to dramatized representation of events with the use of non-diegetic music in narrative cinema. The formal choices, conventions and the appearance of immediacy and "unvarnished reality" (Aufderheide 2007, 12) that constitute the observational documentary style include its professional code, an ethic and a ritual. Mundhra herself confirms this when she says—"[t]he most magical films are made when you embed yourself in a world with participants that you feel are compelling and allow the story to come to you as opposed to chasing your own version of the story."[17] There is, thus, an ethnographic zeal to Mundhra's work as she believes that the best practice is to just turn the camera on her participants and record their lives unhindered

For *A Suitable Girl*, she had gotten the consent of three participants from middle class households in Delhi and Mumbai and their families. Her work on *Indian Matchmaking* started with this same ethnographic zeal. She went through Sima Taparia's (who is a professional matchmaker in real life) "database" of prospective brides and grooms to ask them if they'd be interested in being a part of this show. Almost 99% of the people she reached out to turned the offer down.[18] This left her no choice but to put out a casting call for participants. Two of the participants Aparna Shewakramani and Vyasar Ganeshan had learnt about the casting call through friends.[19] An open casting call to select participants is a regular feature of reality television. A casting call also implies that there was a selection process behind choosing the participants because thousands of people answer a reality program's

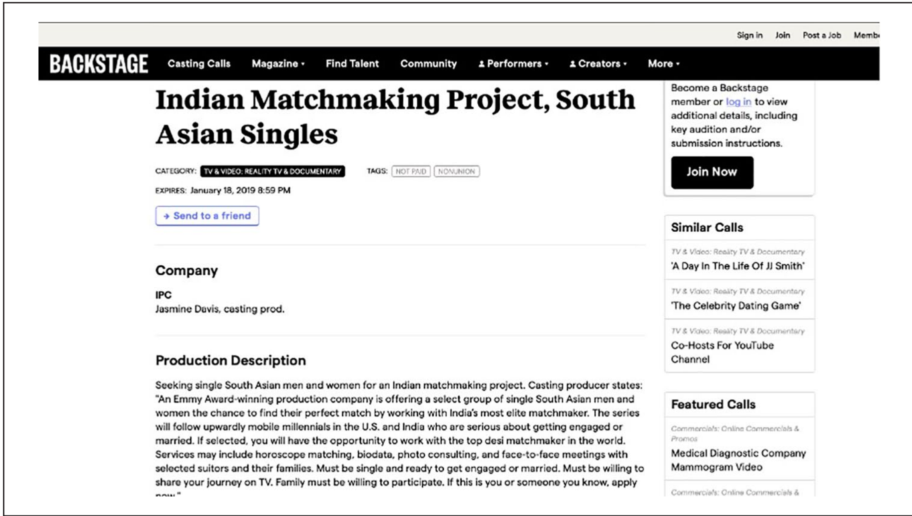

Figure 3. The casting call for *IM* published by the production company IPC (Intellectual Property Corporation) from the website *Backstage*.

casting call (Andrejevic 2002, 264). Thus we can see that from the very beginning, partly by chance and partly by design, *Indian Matchmaking* crossed or was beginning to cross this genre threshold from documentary to reality television (Figure 3).

Though there were a formal set of requirements that were laid out, like availability of the family, the casting call of *Indian Matchmaking* did not mention anything about the specificities of class. The only pre-requisite class component of the casting call was the phrase "upwardly mobile millennials." Once we compare the domestic scenes of interiority of *A Suitable Girl* and *Indian Matchmakin*g, a very noticeable class difference emerges between the on-screen personas. There is a sense of affluence and glamor about the "upwardly mobile millennials" in *Indian Matchmaking* while the reverse is true for *A Suitable Girl*. The well to do, upper middle class, even aristocratic lifestyles of some of the participants are on full display in the former, while the latter focuses on families whose lifestyles are more relatable and "ordinary." There is a sense of squalor, inertia and suburban Indian middle class-ness to the participants in *A Suitable Girl* which conforms much more easily to the visual esthetic style of a documentary. If the documentary is a genre that is generally centered around a social cause and, following Nichols (2001) argument, about the persuasiveness of the social cause, then *A Suitable Girl* makes a much more convincing argument by virtue of the lives that it documents. Below are two stills that give us a sense of how *A Suitable Girl* is employing a mise-en-scene and natural/direct lighting that gives it a more *cinema verité* look which is in stark contrast to the upbeat, vivacious, heightened display of extravagance in *Indian Matchmaking* (Figures 4 and 5). Both the scenes focus on Sima Taparia's interactions with family members of the prospective bride or groom, yet they couldn't be more different in their appeal).

Figure 4. *A Suitable Girl* (2017): Sima Taparia seated on the left wearing a modest blue *salwar kameez*.

Figure 5. *Indian Matchmaking* (2020): Sima Taparia on the right wearing a blue and green *kurti*.

The Sima Taparia of Figure 3 is very easily distinguishable from the Sima Taparia of Figure 2. In the second image, her hair looks professionally done and her clothes chosen by a wardrobe specialist and her upbeat appearance blends well with the mise-*en-scene* in the shots. Moreover, we can also see how in the former, it is the women of the household who are bringing the food as opposed to the second shot where there are uniformed professionals who are performing that same task. At play are also elements of the non-diegetic music that is chosen along with editing techniques. Despite these

apparent differences in the respective spaces represented in *Indian Matchmaking* and *A Suitable Girl*, Mundhra says—

> You know, it's interesting because *A Suitable Girl* more or less existed in exactly the same class breakdown as *Indian matchmaking*. They were all definitely middle-class people. People like Vyassar (a participant from *IM*) are solid middle class in their backgrounds. Then you have Dipti from *A Suitable Girl*, she comes from a middle-class background. Yeah, certainly in *Indian Matchmaking*, we had two characters in Bombay who are a bit flashier, a little bit larger than life and some of the characters in suitable girl, so it may have seemed like a more elite world. Also, that's like the way it was shot, it was brighter, it was lit. You know, like better camera and it was just a lighter show. And it's not like *A Suitable Girl* had much more religious or caste diversity, so I think it's the tone - *A Suitable Girl* was an independent documentary that had a lot of emotional truth to it, you know, so it's forgiven.

It's somewhat of a shocking revelation from Mundhra that the participants of these respective shows/films were from the same class bracket even though our perceptions regarding them could not be more different. The "contestants" of *Indian Matchmaking* are judged by the audience and that judgment is a constant source of pleasure and this pleasure is instrumental in transforming the show into a hate watch. What the viewer of a reality show experiences is partly sympathy but partly also a *schadenfreude* or a delight one experiences at another's misfortune (Skeggs and Wood 2008). By contrast, the viewers of *A Suitable Girl* do not experience *schadenfreude* but rather only sympathy at the plight of the participants. What is evident in this anti-climactic revelation from the showrunner is just how crucial and concealed audio-visual esthetic codes are in bringing about two very different sets of reactions toward the corresponding sets of individuals in the respective shows/films. At the same time then, cringe is not always a reaction against or disdain toward lower class/caste bodies or cultural codes associated with lower classes/castes. It certainly is in some cases, as is evidenced in Verma's (2021) account of dominant cultural reactions to lower caste Tik Tok performers from India who are understood to be the "shudras of the internet" (p. 160). But on a more general level cringe is less an expression of class and more of an expression of the temporality of cultural codes and acceptable norms of social behavior. What is attractive today can be cringe tomorrow like the outdated and excessive props in music videos or older campy films. Like the "ugly feelings" or "negative affects" (envy, irritation, anxiety, etc.) that Ngai (2005) theorizes in her work, cringe is an affect that is marked by an ambivalence which enables it "to resist, on the one hand, their reduction to mere expressions of class ressentiment, and on the other, their counter-valorization as therapeutic 'solutions' to the problems they highlight and condense" (p. 3).

The gaze that the documentary style encourages is indeed very different from the gaze that reality TV or Tik Tok invites. Reality TV, according to Susan J. Douglas, is a popular subject of ironic viewing because we are meant to dislike the behaviors of the people involved within it. Though many women sympathized with the "plight" of some of the female participants in the show,[20] by and large most of the

participants come off as utterly unlikeable. A “key component to the pleasure of many reality TV shows [is] the cultivation of the ironic, knowing viewer [who gets] to judge and mock them, and thus are above them” (Douglas 2013, 149). The same social issue that gets addressed in both these works acquire very different cultural and affective meanings because of elements of style and “look.” There are integral aspects of the decision-making process that go into heightening or “playing up” the game narrative of *Indian Matchmaking*. But Mundhra insists that this is what she had set out to achieve—that of making a show that is both provocative and appealing. Mundhra’s role as a showrunner and her artistic choices of cranking up the degree of “frothiness” and “glossiness” is but only half the story. The next section looks at some of the other factors that contributes to the transforming of a social awareness docu drama into a reality show that can so dexterously invoke cathartic hatred. It takes a closer look at the involvement of the executive producers and their production company in deciding the stylistic elements or the “look” of the show along with Netflix’s promotional narrative of the show.

Indian Matchmaking According to the Intellectual Property Corporation and Netflix

In her interview, Smriti states she had no involvement with the show’s marketing, which is standard practice with streaming platforms. From the get-go, the show was advertised as a reality show. Murray (2009) discusses how networks experiment with different promotional genre-making strategies to amplify the commercial value of a show, giving the example of R.J Cutler’s *American High* (2000 and 2001), a show about suburban Chicago high-school students, their families and teachers. In 2000 Fox promoted and broadcasted *American High* as a reality show. But the network dropped it after four episodes because it was deemed too risqué. Cutler would go on to re-release the show on PBS in 2001, this time as a documentary which went onto to be quite successful. Using this example, Murray (2009) illustrates how “the context of reception of a program can be manipulated to encourage the viewer to understand the meaning of the text through a particular generic lens” (p. 69). A show’s genre and perceived significance often derive from the way networks showcase it.

Interestingly, R.J. Cutler launched a new production company called “This Machine” four months after the release of *Indian Matchmaking* in a joint venture with an entertainment company called Industrial Media. What is relevant is that the CEO and president of Industrial Media, Eli Holzman and Aaron Saidman, are also the executive producers from *Indian Matchmaking*. In an interview[21] shortly after the launch of Cutler’s This Machine, Holzman said he and Saidman admire Cutler for his creative range but more importantly “his eye for compelling stories that reach broad audiences.” A closer look at some of the shows Saidman and Holzman have produced and overseen would reveal a similar formula—that of social-issue-based unscripted television shows dramatized and spectacularized (or made “frothy and glossy”) rather than pitched as serious and prestige documentary.[22] In this regard, it is no coincidence that

the producers of the show have a longstanding relationship with Cutler but also an active investment in his production company. Reaching broad audiences is often a matter of positioning, marketing and genre repurposing and this is precisely what *Indian Matchmaking* as a show also underwent.

When I interviewed Priyanka Singh, the Director of Photography of some of the later episodes of the show, to ask her how much agency she had in deciding the "look" of the show, she informed me that the "look" of the show was already decided before she was brought on. The primary cinematographer was Tom Djokaj who frequently works with Saidman and Holzman's production company (IPC). Djokaj and IPC's involvement in determining the "look" of the show is also confirmed in my conversations with Smriti Mundhra. It's worth mentioning here that Mundhra did not seek out IPC but rather it was Netflix who played the mediator between her and the IPC. The fact that Saidman and Holzman's production company was brought on to produce the show by Netflix and not Mundhra herself tells us a lot of the former's involvement with the visual style of the show—a style perhaps like Cutler's which, to use Holzman's words, could reach broader audiences.

Just as PBS aggressively asserted the angle of social weight and its ties to social value and moral rectitude in promoting *American High* as a documentary, Netflix's promotional trailer for *Indian Matchmaking* also aggressively plays up the capricious nature of its participants as a source of reality drama and sensationalism. Keywords and search strings like "intimacy," "romance," and "wedding" were used instead of terms like "social realism" while promoting the show (Figure 6). *Indian* Matchmaking's promotional posters and trailers neither presented nor implied a sense of cultural rectification and questioning. They contained an unequivocal promise and foreshadowing of only the spectacular. The marketing campaign was designed to appeal to and incite "cringe" or hate to such a degree that the Netflix video library had categorized it earlier under the tag "cringe binge," something that they seem to have changed now. The show's textual and para-textual elements exacerbated this confusion over its genre (regarding whether it is a reality show or a docu series) while also adding to its "viscerality" that renders the show binge-worthy and yet completely "unwatchable".

The perception of the show and the conversations around it were also shaped by a number of YouTube "extras" or "paratexts"[23] that were released on Netflix India's YouTube channels not very dissimilar to how Clough envisions affective formulizers that "make it possible to mobilize/modulate the affect of a population" (Clough 2009, 50). Mann (2014, 27) notes how legacy networks would also use cross-platform promotion to "intensify consumers' participatory engagement with media, helping to make sure these works remain part of the cultural zeitgeist far longer than any on-air promotion for a single linear broadcast can." Streaming platform's spreadability and "new media backchannels" (Gilbert 2019, 69) are more efficient in penetrating these spaces where hatewatching is an already established practice and therefore has a ready discursive community over the internet and on social media. There was a whole host of paratextual materials that were released not on Netflix itself but on Netflix's YouTube channel.

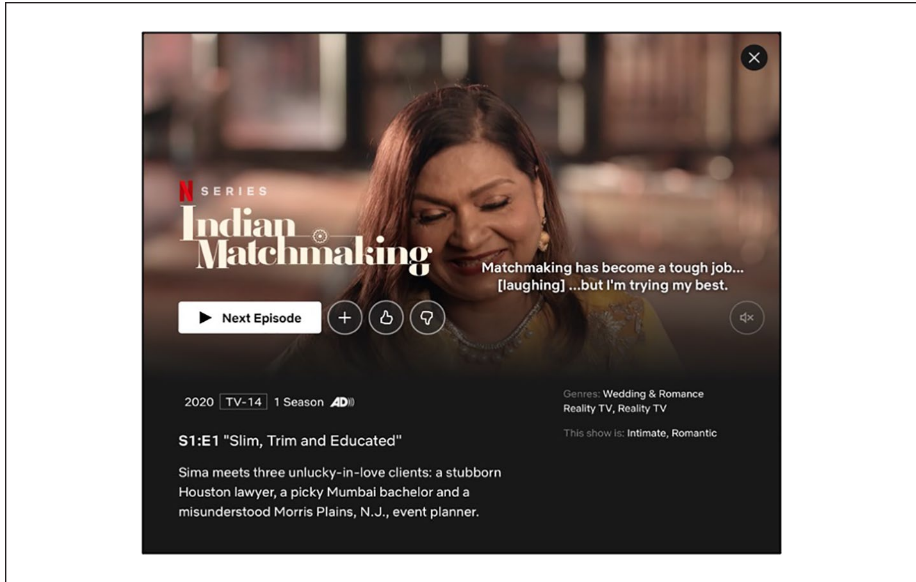

Figure 6. Netflix's title card for *Indian Matchmaking*.

Social Media influencer Tanmay Bhat's nineteen-minute reaction video where he is seen to watch, pause and laugh at sequences from the show was published on Netflix India's YouTube channel on July 21st 2020, exactly five days after the show was released on Netflix (Figure 7). A similar reaction video with Tanmay Bhat, this time joined by another influencer Rohan Joshi to a bonus episode of the show called "Indian Matchmaking: The Cast Finally Reunites" was added to Netflix India's YouTube channel on 31st July 2020 (three days after the bonus episode was released). The second video is more conversational as the influencers ask each other their impressions of the show and the bonus episode. In the video Rohan Joshi describes the show as something akin to "an artful horror movie" to which Tanmay Bhat responds that "it's like watching a car crash but you can't look away".

They proceed to then emulate the familiar retinue of a reaction video where they pause and laugh at the contestants. It would serve us well to remember that these reaction videos were not spontaneous user-generated videos but rather "paratexts" *commissioned by* Netflix. Whether one finds Rohan Joshi and Tanmay Bhat's funny or not, their videos evidence Netflix's desired audience response—not serious exploration of a problematic social practice, but rather condescension, ridicule and contempt toward the matchmaker, the "upwardly mobile millennial" and their families. These videos model the fantasy of superiority with Bhatt and Joshi performing the role of the "knowing viewer" that Douglas (2013) discusses with respect to *Jersey Shore* where you "mock and distance yourself from the cast members, yet hunger to know what on earth they might do next" (p. 150).

Figure 7. A still from Tanmay Bhatt's reaction video on Netflix India's YouTube channel where he and Rohan Joshi is ridiculing one of the contestants from the show.

Moreover, in this form of marketing through cross-platform pollination, *Indian Matchmaking* profits from the exposure that it gets from Tanmay Bhatt and Rohan Joshi's followers, while at the same time the social media influencers reinforce their relevance by taking a lead in conversations happening around a "trending topic" that has acquired "traction" in public discourse. Despite the ridicule that replaces the measured light-heartedness of the network equivalent of similar promotional events (like the stars of a film before its release making guest appearances with talk show hosts on television), the marketing rationale is the same—that of "staying in the conversation" or "generating a buzz." The exception, however, is that the older network era cross-promotion marketing strategy never explored the stickiness and the audience engagement potential of cringe or hate-watching, to the extent the platform ecosystem of YouTube, Twitter, and Netflix does.

Conclusion: Between the Conception and the Creation

I have presented a composite picture of the material circumstances under which a show such as *Indian Matchmaking* generates a sticky affect to engage the attention span of the viewer for a considerable period of time. Hate being a powerful emotion, is ideal for a culture industry whose commercial success is increasingly defined by its ability to make the consumer an active commentator thereby exponentially augmenting a consumer product's reach, popularity, and stickiness. My paper shows how Netflix's participation in the platform economy, its distribution and advertisement techniques, regulate discursive formations around the show and govern its generative affects to profit from its audience labor. I do not undertake a reparative reading of the show to focus on its "progressive" elements and nuances that could have perhaps contradicted

its popular ideological critique. But my objective was to instead demonstrate how any nuance that the show may have contained gets heavily inhibited by its visual style and paratextual framing. The viewer performance to "be seen by others as not being duped" (Andrejevic 2008, 38) is precisely what Netflix anticipates and co-opts. As a result the active viewer's loathing gaze and the showrunner's "original" and "progressive" visions and creative impulses are both revised and redrafted.[24]

Finally, there is an implicit connection between hatewatching and the fact that *Indian Matchmaking* along with *Tiger King* came out during a global pandemic. Both of these shows were huge successes but also controversial owing to the fact that they supposedly and "unknowingly" led to "progressive conversations" about social realities. Horeck (2021) points to binge watching's "self-care" function during the early months of the pandemic that then came to be experienced as a "politically productive activity, one tied to social-justice projects" (p. 37). Horeck's argument indicates how a show like *Indian Matchmaking* represents sites and institutions that ought to be transformed by the anger, hate and a turn to self-care. Thus, instead of being seen as an intervention and a tool for reform, the show comes to be seen as a part of the problem that it was envisioned to address, if not rectify. Therefore, it evokes "cringeworthy" feelings and becomes instead a tool to facilitate the cathartic[25] release of hate through perfunctory watching and loud participatory discourse—perhaps a necessary but a thankless job especially in the age of disinhibition and social media. It becomes a vehicle for the dissipation, ablution, and concomitant renewal of hate—a hatred toward our own ambiguous neoliberal subjection, shared cultural trauma, and the regressive traditionalism of the past and the present.

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Research Interests

Media industries studies, digital labor and platform, materiality, television studies, philosophy of humor

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Notes

1. See Jaspal (2014)—"It is acknowledged, both in academic research and in public discourse, that the cultural expectation of marriage, in particular, can pose social and psychological challenges for nonheterosexual ethnic/religious minorities."
2. Communicated via personal communication December 28th, 2020.
3. Jenkins et al. (2013) discuss how the concept of stickiness or virality with respect to media and technological marketing can be traced back to the "viral marketing" of Hotmail back in 1995 (p. 19).
4. "Indian Matchmaking: An 8-episode of misguided gender politics, ultimately a betrayal for Indian audiences" (2020) by Ishita Sengupta in Indian Express. https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/art-and-culture/indian-matchmaking-wary-of-arranged-marriage-gender-politics-6517076/.
5. Jagannathan, Poorna. Twitter post. July 18, 2020, 12:43 pm. My hunch is that this was a paid tweet sponsored by Netflix as a marketing gimmick, but I cannot assert this without concrete evidence of which I have none.
6. Columnist Nehmat Kaur writing for *The Wire* talks about how the show *Indian Matchmaking* normalizes how matchmaking as a social experience is a severely dehumanizing and damaging experience for most women as they are objectified, commodified and reduced to desirable physical and material attributes before being rendered "fit" for marriage. The experience is often traumatic and leaves enduring psychological impact for the women who go through it. "Why Some of Us Can't Even Hate-Watch Netflix's 'Indian Matchmaking'" by Kaur (2020), published in *The Wire* (Online). https://thewire.in/culture/netflix-indian-matchmaking-arranged-marriage.
7. In the case of streaming platforms, the metric of that success is only known to the platform. We can't show how successful the show is in terms of TV viewership numbers or box office numbers through ticket sales. It is precisely the audience engagement, infact, that is an enduring testimony of its commercial success. Further evidence of its status as "commercial success" is the fact that there is a second season of the show that has been commissioned by Netflix.
8. Nick Seaver's work shows us how the task of algorithms was not always about "trapping audiences" but rather it was mainly for managing large catalogs of information. This changed during the early 2000s with what Seaver calls the "captological turn" or the rise of "captivation metrics." Seaver (2019) writes "[w]here the goal of recommendation had once been to accurately represent the future, it was now to keep users streaming, retaining them as paying subscribers" (p. 423).
9. This is true even for older music videos or clips from pageant interviews from the 1990s that sometimes arbitrarily resurface on social media and instantly become cringe. In some ways, its perhaps easier to explain how old video clips evoke cringe in us since the socio-cultural matrix and institutions that arbitrate taste cultures have undergone massive changes (Bourdieu 1984).
10. For instance, in 2013, a relatively unknown Pakistani singer Taher Shah released a song called "Eye to Eye" on YouTube and became an overnight sensation after audiences in the world over absolutely loved how utterly ridiculous the stylistic elements in his music video were. The singer's wardrobe selection, which was both outdated and excessive, his gauche

and inelegant long curls, awkward dancing and questionable CGI elements evoked a sense of camp but not in a way that would be self-reflexive or would reinforce itself. Sconce (2007) documents the rise of this form of cynical hatewatching in films from the 1990s and early 2000s. He calls it "the cinema of negative guarantees" and shows how these forms of camps are loved precisely because they are bad.

11. Regarding marketing Mundhra revealed—"So they had to be marketed as more of a reality show one just in order to get the audience interested. It was deliberately edited the way it was. It was made very differently than a traditional or a nuanced documentary." via personal communication December 28th, 2020.
12. Interview with Sunetra Chowdhury, *On the Record*, Hindustan Times (video), July 29th, 2020, accessed on YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nN8naDbhUag&ab_channel=HindustanTimes.
13. In the Introduction to the edited volume *Novel Gazing*, Sedgewick reconsiders the legacy of critical theory—that is critical theory informed by hermeneutics of suspicion of Freud Nietzsche and Marx. This is an intellectual tradition she is undoubtedly a part of. But this critical tradition has given birth to a strategy of reading which she calls "paranoid reading" which according to her "diagnoses instead of prescribing" (Sedgewick 1997, 5) and has become a "mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities." The alternative she proposes is that of reparative reading where the reader instead opens oneself to surprises instead of preventing every possible "bad surprise" to come.
14. Interview with Sunetra Chowdhury, *On the Record*, Hindustan Times (video), July 29th, 2020, accessed on YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nN8naDbhUag&ab_channel=HindustanTimes.
15. Ibid 9.
16. *"Indian Matchmaking* Exposes the Easy Acceptance of Caste" by Yashica Dutt in *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/08/netflix-indian-matchmaking-and-the-shadow-of-caste/614863/.
17. Ibid 5.
18. Web interview with Abha Bakaya for Ladies who Lead (video). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S13oQ2Yowg4&t=831s&ab_channel=LadiesWhoLead.
19. Aparna Shewakramani and Vyasar Ganeshan interview with Lisa Bonos for *Washington Post*, August 28, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2020/08/28/indian-matchmaking-netflix-aparna-vyasar/
20. See Nadia Jagessar interview with Elena Nicolaou for Oprah Magazine, dated July 29th, 2020, (web). https://www.oprahmag.com/entertainment/a33456690/where-is-nadia-now-indian-matchmaking/. The contestants like Aparna Shewakramani, Nadia Jagessar and Vyasar Ganeshan have given a number of public interviews where they have shown a readiness to embrace their newfound celebrityhood. In an interview for *Oprah Magazine*, Nadia reveals how the show has "turned [her] life upside down in the best way possible" and how her Instagram follower count has exponentially increased. Aparna Shewakramani who was initially widely disliked later revealed in the cast reunion bonus episode how many women have reached out to her since the show aired. In some ways, she was seen as the epitome of "fiercely independent," seemingly non-compromising, neoliberal womanhood—an archetype that professional young women viewers could easily relate to.
21. See Rick Porter, "R.J. Cutler, Industrial Media Team for Production Venture," in *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 19th, 2020.
22. The Intellectual Property Corporation's (owned by Industrial Media) first documentary/reality hybrid unscripted series was *Leah Remini: Scientology and the Aftermath*

(2016–2019) was broadcasted on the A&E Network and similarly dramatized a series of interviews by former Scientology members. Similarly, there's also the 2019 docu-series *Living Undocumented* which IPC produced in collaboration with Selena Gomez, a similar social issue based unscripted series dramatized in the same fashion as *Scientology and the Aftermath* and *Indian Matchmaking*.

23. These are akin to what Caldwell (2008) calls "paratexts." Paratexts are an umbrella term for bonus episodes, DVD extras and making of videos in the context of legacy network television. Certainly, forms and mediums of the paratexts have changed over time as a testament to how prolific, malleable, complex, and clever digital marketing has become, but the overarching logic still remains somewhat the same. Gray (2010) also talks about how paratexts condition passages and trajectories between the three spheres of media practice—the text, the audience, and the industry.
24. In this regard, I feel that I must also passingly mention Sarita Khurana whose role in the show remains unclear. Khurana was Mundhra's creative collaborator for *A Suitable Girl*. Her background in filmmaking is also very similar to Smriti's. In 2020, she directed a documentary short called *Home Delivered* which focusses on the distresses of the senior Asian immigrant communities in the US in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. I say that her role in the show was unclear because she was not listed as a consulting producer on IMDB. The trade papers also don't link her with *Indian Matchmaking*. But her name does appear in the credits at the end of some of the episodes of Indian Matchmaking. Interestingly, when I tried to approach her for an interview, she sounded very enthusiastic till I mentioned that I was working on *Indian Matchmaking*. The interview was cut short and she politely asked me to speak to Smriti Mundhra first and then follow up with her. Needless to say, I never heard from her again when I followed up with her a month after I had spoken to Mundhra.
25. I use the word catharsis here in a political way. Brazilian political theater practitioner Boal in his book Theater *of the Oppressed* (1974) talks about how the Aristotelian function of catharsis or the purging of powerful emotions as the desired end goal of a tragedy is ultimately pointless because it follows a state of repose. Aristotelian catharsis results in the restoration of equilibrium and the status quo. This is because he thinks that powerful emotions that are evoked by theater can be utilized for social mobilization which is very similar to Lukacs' idea of hate being used as a political tool. But if these powerful emotions are purged through catharsis, then they cannot result in collectivization and a push for social change—"The poetics of Aristotle is the poetics of oppression: the world is known, perfect or about to be perfected, and all its values are imposed on the spectators, who passively delegate power to the characters to act and think in their place. In so doing the spectators purge themselves of their tragic flaw—that is, of something capable of changing society. A catharsis of the revolutionary impetus is produced! Dramatic action substitutes for real action" (Boal 1974, 135).

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