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Presence, Absence, Anonymity: Gendered Mobility in the Age of Location-Aware Media

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Abstract: The paper examines how location-aware social media platforms reshape women's experience of urban public space through new regimes of visibility, surveillance, and digital identity. Historically, women's access to and movement within public spaces have been closely monitored and socially regulated. With the proliferation of locative media such as Google Maps, Instagram and Snapchat, women's mobility in the city is increasingly negotiated through technological interfaces that mediate presence, safety and anonymity. Drawing on qualitative observations of young women in Kochi, Kerala, this study explores how everyday practices such as self-tracking, location previewing and selective location sharing becomes strategies for navigating unfamiliar urban environments. These practices reveal a paradox: while location-aware apps intensify the possibility of surveillance, they are simultaneously appropriated by women as tools of navigation, control and what may be understood as forms of 'counter surveillance.' The paper argues that digital presence does not merely represent women's movement through the city but actively produces new spatial experiences shaped by platform logics. Moreover, location-sharing practices followed by women on platforms like Snapchat allow us to reflect on why they often choose to remain anonymous while marking their presence in a particular location. This negotiation of presence and absence highlights how technology reconfigures gendered relations with public space, safety and privacy. By situating these practices within the context of an urban Global South city, the paper contributes to discussions on gender and technology, surveillance and privacy, and the role of social media in producing contemporary spatial experience.

Keywords: *Gendered mobility, Locative media, Digital special agency, Urban public space, Digital urbanism*

1. Introduction

A woman who is a trainee journalist, fresh out of college, new to the city of Kochi, is preparing to set out for an assignment in a neighbourhood she has never been to before. Getting ready to leave, she opens Google Maps and takes a few minutes to study the route she has to travel. She makes a mental note of the distance from the bus stop, the shops and establishments along the path she has to walk and even downloads the offline map. She then opens Instagram to search for the geotagged images of the neighbourhood. She scrolls through the images to develop a sense of the space, analysing whether it is buzzing or deserted, commercial or residential, familiar or unfamiliar. She is surveilling the space before allowing herself to be surveilled within it.

This vignette captures the core concern of this paper. Location-aware social media platforms such as Google Maps, Snapchat and Instagram are ubiquitous features of contemporary urban life, yet their implications for gendered mobility remain theoretically underexplored, particularly outside the Global North. ‘The city’ has never functioned as a neutral space. Its streets, temporal rhythms and architectural structures have historically been organised around assumptions regarding who is entitled to occupy public space and under what conditions. For women, navigating the space around them has often been a continuous process of negotiation, requiring a range of temporal, spatial and behavioural adaptations that begin before leaving the house. These adaptations occur throughout their movement within the city.

In the last decade, a significant transformation has happened, with these negotiations being increasingly mediated through digital technologies. Many women in Indian cities now plan routes on Google Maps, preview locations through Instagram before physically visiting them, share their whereabouts selectively on Snapchat, and leave safety notes for strangers on Google reviews. These practices are ordinary, everyday, largely unremarked, and yet they constitute a significant transformation in the relationship between women, urban space, and visibility. It is this transformation that the paper tries to address. It is a study of how location-aware social media platforms rewire women’s experience of urban public spaces. It attempts to contextualise how platform logics are built on infrastructures of data extraction that enable new forms of surveillance, and how women negotiate with the same platforms to claim their space in the city.

The study is located in Kochi, Kerala, a rapidly urbanising coastal city whose particular social landscape makes it a productive and underexplored site for this inquiry. Kochi is a city of overlapping mobilities, considering that it is home to a large and growing population of young working women and students who commute daily through a physically and socially complex urban environment. Its expanding metro network, its heritage waterfront, its arts economy, and its significant tourist

infrastructure shall be weighed against the fact that it is also a city where smartphone penetration is high and social media use is deeply embedded in everyday life, making it an ideal site for examining how digital and physical urban experiences are entangled. In choosing Kochi, this paper makes a deliberate methodological and political choice, to contribute to a still-underdeveloped scholarship on digital urbanism in the Global South, where the specific socio-cultural, postcolonial, and infrastructural conditions of city life inflect women's digital practices in ways that existing frameworks do not fully capture.

2. Locating the Problem: Women, Public Space and the City

Feminist geographers, across several decades of scholarship, have established that urban public space is not gender-neutral. The city has never offered unconditional entry for women, and to understand how location-aware media transforms women's urban experience, it is necessary to familiarise oneself with the centuries-long history of spatial exclusion that digital tools have reconfigured. Doreen Massey's account of space as produced through social relations becomes the foundational framework to examine this. Space, for Massey, is not a platform where social interactions occur, but an ongoing product of the social relations that form it. Gender, needless to say, is indispensable to understanding these social relations. Massey argues that at the core of gendered geography of public space is what she describes as *differential mobility*, the unequal distribution of the freedom to move, such that some people initiate and control movement flows, while others are, in effect, imprisoned by them (Massey 149). Women's relationship with urban mobility has historically fallen on the lesser advantaged side of this distribution. Hence, the gendered geography of public space is, at its core, a geography of differential mobility.

Elizabeth Wilson's *The Sphinx in the City* situates this differential historically. Wilson argues that the emergence of modern metropolis brought women new possibilities of anonymity, independence, the pleasure of *flânerie*, and simultaneously generated new mechanisms of regulation. Wilson observes that the city has always been the site of a double bind. Women threaten the moral order of the street by their mere unaccompanied presence, yet the street threatens women through its disorder and danger (Wilson 7). This double bind structured the nineteenth-century city and has never fully dissolved, according to her. Women who move through public space without a clear purpose or a male escort, without observable justification for their presence, continue to invite scrutiny.

Gill Valentine's foundational study of the geography of women's fear demonstrated how this scrutiny operates not only through actual incidents of harassment or violence but through the anticipation of such incidents, which substantially shapes women's spatial behaviour. Fear of crime and sexual harassment leads not merely to physical avoidance of certain spaces at certain times but to

the internalisation of spatial restrictions, says Valentine. This is observed as a self-imposed geography of fear that is socially produced yet experienced as individual (Valentine 385). Rachel Pain extended this analysis, arguing that the performance of safety in public space by moving purposefully, avoiding eye contact, calculating routes, constitutes a significant and largely invisible dimension of women's everyday urban labour (Pain 416). Linda McDowell further demonstrated that this labour is not merely individual but structural. It reflects and reproduces a gendered division of urban space that assigns women to domestic interiors and cedes public exteriors to men (McDowell 156).

Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade have taken this discussion forward in the Indian context in their phenomenal work *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets*. Phadke, Khan and Ranade argue that Indian women's access to public space is governed by what they term as a *risk paradigm*: a social logic that extends conditional entry to women those who are accompanied, purposefully employed, appropriately dressed, while denying it to women who loiter, or occupy public space without productive justification (Phadke, Khan and Ranade 15). They argue that the right to loiter, to be in public space simply for pleasure, curiosity or rest is a right that Indian women have never been fully granted, and its denial is in fact constitutive of the spatial order. The 'respectable' woman moves through the public space purposefully and defensively; she doesn't linger or claim the street as hers. This framework is directly relevant to the practices documented in this study. The women in Kochi who plan routes in advance, preview locations before visiting, and manage their digital visibility while moving through the city are not overreacting to imagined risks. Instead, they are navigating a spatial order whose terms Phadke, Khan and Ranade have precisely described.

Leslie Kern's *Feminist City* brings this tradition into the present, arguing that cities remain largely designed for an implicitly male subject and that women's navigation strategies constitute a form of ongoing adaptive labour in an environment that was not built for them (Kern 34). Kern's framework is particularly productive for thinking about digital navigation tools as an extension of this adaptive labour rather than its resolution. Google Maps, Instagram, and Snapchat do not solve the problem of gendered urban space, instead they provide a new terrain on which that problem is negotiated, with new tools. The smartphone does not make the city safe for women; it gives women a more sophisticated apparatus for managing their relationship to a city that remains structured against them fundamentally.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is built on three interlocking concepts. Michel de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics, developed in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, is the key point. For de Certeau, strategies are the operations of institutions that possess a position of established power

from which they can plan, accumulate and impose order. Tactics, by contrast, are the operations of those who lack such a place. As de Certeau writes, a tactic is “a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus” (de Certeau 37). Platform corporations are strategic actors who possess the servers, code, terms of service and data. Women who use their platforms to navigate the city are tactical actors who work with tools they did not design to negotiate with their surroundings. Tactical actors are always already entangled with the systems they resist. The woman who activates Ghost Mode on Snapchat works within an infrastructure whose primary purpose is behavioural data extraction. Soshana Zuboff’s (2019) concept of surveillance capitalism names this infrastructure precisely: a system in which location data is among the most valuable forms of behavioural surplus, extracted from users and sold in behavioural futures markets (Zuboff 8). Women’s tactical practices do not dismantle this system; they reroute through this.

Lefebvre’s spatial triad, developed in *The Production of Space*, provides another register of analysis. Lefebvre distinguishes three dimensions of space: *conceived space* which is the space of planners, cartographers and platform engineers, oriented toward power; *perceived space* which is the space of everyday practice, routes and habitual movements, and *lived space* which is the space of affect, memory and experience from within (Lefebvre 38). GPS platforms like Google Maps operate primarily as conceived space, in the sense that they produce an abstract, measurable version of the city that serves the purpose of spatial management and data extraction. Women’s locative practices, however, are anchored in lived space. Their engagement with digital mapping tools is therefore a constant negotiation between the abstractions of conceived space and the embodied realities of lived space.

The second core concept of the framework concerns locative media and its specifically gendered dimensions. Adriana de Souza e Silva and Jordan Frith’s account of mobile interfaces establishes that location -aware apps do not simply orient users within a pre-existing space but actively produce what de Souza e Silva terms *hybrid space*, a form of social space in which physical and digital dimensions are mutually constitutive rather than separate (e Silva and Frith 174). Women navigating Kochi with their phones are not choosing between physical and digital space, they inhabit a hybrid space produced through their simultaneous engagement with both. Nanna Verhoeff’s (2012) concept of the *navigational dispositive* extends this further. Verhoeff observes that the mobile screen is not a passive window onto the world but an active apparatus that simultaneously frames, mediates and produces spatial experience (Verhoeff 14). Scenarios such as the phone held up to check a route, the map consulted mid-journey and the Instagram preview of a destination are not neutral acts of information retrieval but performative engagements through which urban space is actively constituted. Agnieszka Leszczynski and Sarah Elwood’s (2015) feminist geographies of new spatial media provide

the explicitly gendered dimension of this account, demonstrating that locative technologies are not gender-neutral but are embedded in and productive of the spatial power relations that differentially position women as users, as data subjects and as navigators of urban space (Leszczynski and Elwood 12). Their framework establishes that the intersection of gender and locative media is not incidental to either field but constitutive of both.

The third core concept concerns digital anonymity and the politics of visibility. Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum's theory of obfuscation names a specific practice within the tactical negotiation described earlier. Obfuscation, as argued in *Obfuscation: A User's Guide for Privacy and Protest*, is "the deliberate addition of ambiguous, confusing, or misleading information to interfere with surveillance and data collection" (Brunton and Nissenbaum 1), a weapon of the informationally weak, suited to those who cannot refuse to be tracked but can complicate what being tracked means. The woman who marks her presence on Snapchat's Snap Map while withholding her name and identity is visible but not fully legible. In fact, she has introduced ambiguity into the signal without removing it. This is precisely the form of tactical agency obfuscation theory describes, a strategic complication of visibility rather than its refusal. Helen Nissenbaum's earlier theory of contextual integrity provides a normative complement to this account, holding that information flows appropriately when they match the norms of the context in which they were originally shared (Nissenbaum 127). Women's selective location sharing, disclosing whereabouts to a trusted contact while withholding them from the platform at large, constitutes an attempt to restore contextual integrity that platform logics violated. Taken together, these frameworks allow us to grasp women's locative media practices as simultaneously constructed and creative, surveilled and resistant, neither fully determined by the platforms they inhabit nor fully free of them.

4. Methodology

This study draws on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Kochi, Kerala. The site was chosen for reasons that are both practical and theoretical. Kochi is a rapidly urbanising coastal city with a large and growing population of young working women and students who navigate a physically and socially complex urban environment on a daily basis. Smartphone penetration is high, social media use is deeply embedded in everyday life, and the city's particular configuration of heritage spaces, expanding transit infrastructure, and tourist economy creates a layered urban landscape in which questions of women's mobility, safety and digital presence are especially live. As a research site, Kochi offers not a representative Indian city but a specific and generative place where the entanglement of gendered urban space and locative media culture is already in active formation and therefore productive to study.

The primary method was in-depth semi-structured interviewing. 8 participants were interviewed, and they were selected through purposive and snowball sampling from among young professionals and students, demographics representing the range of mobile, urban-aspirant women who falls into the age group of 18-28, for whom locative media is a significant everyday resource. This range was deliberate, since rather than narrowing to a single demographic, the study sought participants whose different relationships to the city would illuminate different dimensions of the practices under investigation. Interviews were conducted in Malayalam, and lasted between one and two hours each. Conversations were organised around participants' everyday practices with Google Maps, Snapchat and Instagram, with particular attention to the circumstances under which they used these platforms, the decisions they made about visibility and anonymity, and the relationship between their digital practices and their felt experience of urban safety.

The interviews were complemented by ethnographic observation in the locations participants described. Field sites included commercial areas such as Lulu Mall and MG Road, transit spaces including metro station and auto rickshaw stand, and residential neighbourhoods across the city. This combination of interview and observation allowed the analysis to move between participants' accounts of their practices and the spatial contexts those practices are designed to navigate, grounding the interpretive claims of the paper in both reported experience and observed environment. The approach is broadly consistent with what Sarah Pink (2016) terms sensory practices through which users encounter and produce the spaces they inhabit.

Analysis was conducted through thematic coding, with particular attention to the recurrence of the terms 'safety' and 'familiarity' across participants' accounts. These terms organised participants' narratives in ways that pointed toward three analytical themes: location previewing, selective sharing, and anonymity as presence. Their recurrence was not imposed by the analytical framework, but emerged from the data. The fieldwork was conducted with full ethical approval. Participants' identities are protected throughout through pseudonymisation, and identifying details have been withheld where their inclusion could compromise anonymity. The researcher's own position as a woman and a media scholar with sustained familiarity with Kerala's urban contexts, was attended through reflexive practice throughout the research process.

5. Navigating the City: Self-Tracking, Route Planning and Location Previewing

One of the most consistent practices reported across participants in the study was the use of locative media to preview locations before physically visiting them. This practice of pre-emptive spatial navigation, conducted through screens rather than streets, constitutes a form of what Deborah Lupton terms *self-tracking*, which is the use of digital tools to monitor, assess and manage the body's

relationship to its environment (Lupton 2). For the women in this study, self-tracking is not the fitness oriented, data-collecting practice most commonly associated with the term. It is a survival strategy, or a way of mapping risk before encountering it in person. The platforms they use were not designed for this purpose. Instead, it is a tactical appropriation of tools built for other ends, redirected towards the specific spatial demands of navigating a city that has not been designed with women's safety in mind.

Location previewing took two main forms across participants' accounts: navigation previewing through Google Maps, and visual and atmospheric previewing through Instagram. These two platforms function differently and produce different kinds of spatial knowledge, but together they constitute a composite practice through which women assemble enough information about a place to decide whether, when and how to enter it.

5.1 Google Maps as Risk Assessment Tool

For several women journalists and students interviewed, Google Maps served as an advance reconnaissance tool rather than a real-time navigation aid. Before visiting an unfamiliar neighbourhood, participants reported studying the map for street layout, identifying landmarks, checking the proximity of bus stops or junctions, and noting the density of small shops and businesses along the proposed route. What is significant is that the map is being used not to find one's way but to evaluate the safety of a proposed movement before it occurs. Google Maps does not tag streets by safety level, and its user reviews are not organised around women's concerns about harassment or visibility. Yet women find resources for a safety analysis the platform did not design and did not intend to provide, in its data.

One of the participants, Priya, a journalist who occasionally works evening assignments, described her practice in these terms: "When I get a new assignment, check the place first. I am new to this city. I don't know most of the places. So, if the place is new to me, I just check the route on Google Map first. I can see the distance, the route, and also whether public transport is available. It is scary to be honest, but when I check Google Map first, it gives me a feeling that I can manage this." Priya's account resonates with that of many other young women who are unfamiliar with the location within the city, and tries to overcome their fears by the digital tools they have in hand. Megha, a Masters student who has relocated to Kochi recently for her studies, said that she keeps her Google Map open while she takes an auto for commute. Megha explained how this seemingly simple exercise gives her confidence to get along with her life in an unfamiliar city, with the Map giving her reassurance that the routes taken by the auto driver is indeed in the right direction. 'Safety' and 'fear' were two words that recurred in these conversations the researcher had with women who negotiated with the city in their own terms, using the digital tools that are accessible to them. The researcher

herself has found exercising these practices, by checking for routes with the maximum number of local businesses on Google Map, to ensure safer commute while walking through the city. These are certain patterns of Google Map usage that emerged from the field study.

This is Verhoeff's navigational *dispositif* in its most explicitly gendered form: the screen does not merely represent the city, but actively mediates the woman's decision about whether to enter it, producing a form of spatial knowledge, and a form of spatial power, that is inseparable from the act of looking at the screen. The god's-eye view of the digital map, which Haraway (1988) identifies as a characteristically masculine fantasy of mastery, is here appropriated by women as a tool of self-protection. De Certeau's tactical logic is made visible here in a specific, everyday, gendered practice.

5.2 Instagram as Spatial Reconnaissance

Instagram previewing operated differently but served related purposes. Where Google Maps provides schematic, qualitative spatial information such as distances, street layouts and business locations, Instagram provides what several participants described as the 'feel of a place.' It mostly attributes to the social texture, demographic character and affective atmosphere of a place. Browsing geotagged images of a location before visiting it gives women access to a form of crowdsourced spatial intelligence that the abstract representation of the map cannot provide. One of the participants, Nimisha, who is an IT professional working in Kochi, explained how she makes use of Instagram before deciding where to hangout with friends: "I've been in Kochi for a few months now. I'm still getting familiar with popular locations and cafes here. So, whenever I wish to go out with friends, I open Instagram and looks for photographs of the place. This works most of the time, as the tagged photos give an idea of the overall appearance of the place, and whether girl groups like ours frequent the place. If I see pictures of groups of girls hanging there, and may be an image description that explains the vibe of the place, I feel more confident to actually go there."

Another account shared by Meera, a young professional who works as a content writer in Kochi, can be read alongside this: "I find it very uncomfortable to go to public places such as parks and walkways that I have not been to before, especially when I am alone. Looking at the photographs of these places shared by people on Instagram helps me to understand the place better, so that when I actually go there it feels like I am not new to the place. It makes things a little bit lesser awkward for me. It feels as if I'm also actually a part of the place." Throughout her conversation with the researcher, Meera spoke about how these little practices helped her get into a relationship with the city that she now lived in, claiming its public places in the process.

The user-generated content of Instagram, such as photographs taken by others for other purposes, shared without any intention of providing safety intelligence, is reappropriated as precisely such intelligence. Karatsoli and Nathanail have documented how image-based social media platforms transform into information sources for urban mobility decision-making, arguing that user-generated content reshapes how people evaluate and navigate urban space (Karatsoli and Nathanail 20). Their study confirms and extends their analysis by foregrounding the gendered dimension of this information-seeking, by stating that women are not simply looking for information about places but for evidence that a place is navigable, hospitable and legible on their own terms. The question they bring to Instagram is not ‘where is this place’ but ‘is this place for me.’

Lefebvre’s spatial triad illuminates what is at stake in this two-platform practice. The conceived space of Google Maps does not capture what women need to know to feel safe. Instagram’s accumulation of images represents something closer to perceived space; it represents the city as it is actually used, seen and inhabited by its users. Women’s Instagram previewing is an attempt to access perceived and lived space through the tools of conceived space, and to extract affective and social knowledge from a platform built for image circulation rather than spatial intelligence.

Together, these two practices constitute a pre-emptive spatial practice that is simultaneously deeply practical and theoretically significant. It is practical in the most immediate sense that women use it to be safe and confident. It is theoretically significant because it reveals the relationship between spatial knowledge and spatial power. The women in this study do not trust the city and its official representation to be safe. Hence, they have built their own informal spatial awareness network from the tools available to them.

6. Presence and Anonymity: Location Sharing and the Paradox of Visibility

If the practices documented in the previous section concern the management of space before entering it, the practices examined here concern the management of identity while inhabiting it. Women in this study did not simply navigate the city through their screens. Instead, they negotiated the terms on which they appeared in the digital representation of that city, managing who could see them, on which platforms, in what form, and with how much of themselves disclosed. These negotiations cluster around a central paradox presented by this paper, which is the simultaneous assertion of digital presence and the withholding of digital identity. It is their way of marking the city with one’s presence while remaining anonymous to the wider gaze.

6.1 Selective Sharing and the Architecture of Trust

The first set of practices concerned the management of location-sharing across platforms and audiences. Participants reported granular, contextually sensitive decision-making that reflected their awareness of multiple, differently trusted audiences that constitute their digital social worlds. On Snapchat, the central mechanism for this management is the Ghost Mode feature, which allows users to control precisely who can see their live location. Participants described a tiered architecture of sharing. Close family members and intimate friends were granted access to live location data, while a wider circle of acquaintances received selective Snaps without location data attached. The general public, on the other hand, was excluded from location knowledge altogether.

One of the participants of the study, Megha, shared an account on her Snapchat practices: “I love using Snapchat, but I always make sure that my location is not being shared on the Snap Map. Snap Map has this feature where it sends you a notification if any of your friends are in your city, asking if we’d like to meet them, if you have enabled your location sharing feature. One day, I got a notification saying that one of my acquaintances from Snapchat is nearby my location. I got to my nerves. If I am getting such a notification, others on my Snapchat will be getting similar notifications about my location, right? And this person was not even a close friend, just an acquaintance I used to share snaps with. It made me uncomfortable and I immediately stopped sharing my location on the Map. I then discovered this cool feature called Ghost Mode, which hides my location from everyone, even from my friends. Since then, I’ve been using Ghost Mode. It saves me from a lot of unnecessary questions about why I am at a certain location at a certain time. I feel it also ensures my safety to some extent. I don’t want people to be aware of my routine, but I still want to use Snapchat.”

Megha, here, feels much more comfortable using Snapchat and documenting her daily life with the Ghost Mode on, because it makes sure that she shares her location-specific information only with the people she chooses. This tiered architecture reflects what Nissenbaum terms *contextual integrity*. It is the principle that states information flows appropriately when they match the norms of the context in which the information was originally shared (Nissenbaum 127). A woman sharing her live location with her mother while returning home late at night is respecting the contextual norm of family safety coordination, whereas sharing the same data with a wide social network violates a different norm of privacy from acquaintances whose trustworthiness has not been established. The labour of maintaining these distinctions is significant, largely invisible and disproportionately borne by women whose safety considerations make it both necessary and urgent.

Google Map's location-sharing feature was used similarly, primarily for real-time safety coordination with trusted contacts. Several participants described their live location with a close friends or family member as a standard practice when travelling at night or visiting unfamiliar areas alone. Nithya, a participant of the study explained how she shares her live location with her roommate every time she returns home after a late shift: "Whenever I take a cab or rikshaw back from office after a late shift, I share my live location with my roommate. Maybe it is an unnecessary practice, but it gives me relief to know that someone else knows my whereabouts. May be, eventually I will gain the courage to travel without fear, but now this is one way I have found that will soothe me while on commute."

This practice carries a dual function. It provides accountability and creates a form of distributed watching that serves the woman's safety rather than external surveillance. The watching here is not imposed from above but solicited from below, on the woman's own terms and for her own purposes. danah boyd's concept of *context collapse*, the tendency of social media platforms to flatten distinct social audiences into a single undifferentiated public, is directly relevant here (boyd 31). The practices of selective sharing documented in this paper a precisely responses to context collapse. They are attempts to restore the contextual differentiation that platform architecture has dissolved, and to reconstitute a social world of differentiated trust within a system designed for undifferentiated visibility.

6.2 Anonymity as Presence: The Paradox of Locative Identity

The most analytically significant finding of this study is a practice that exceeds both of the preceding categories. It is not primarily a practice of risk assessment, nor simply one of selective sharing. It is something more theoretically rich: the deliberate choice to mark one's presence in a location digitally while withholding one's identity from public record of that presence.

Teena, a 19-year-old participant of the study, who has recently moved to Kochi for studies, shared a very peculiar account: "I use Snapchat a lot. I like to click pictures of the places I go to, put interesting filters on those pictures and share it with friends. I find it amusing to let others know that I've been there. I share my snaps on Snap Map also. But I really don't want to be seen on Snap Map. I don't want my relatives and family friends see me on the Map and track me. So, I usually turn of the 'Display my Username' option on Snap Map before sharing images. Once I do this, the photo I post will be visible to everyone who goes on Snap Map, but my name or any other details will not be visible. I can add to the Snap Map repository of various locations in Kochi, but no one will know it is me. My close friends can identify the photo I shared, though. They will recognise it by the filters I use and the text I add. This is like a little secret game."

Teena's Snaps are visible, geotagged and public, but her name is hidden. She appears as an anonymous presence in the location, contributing to the map's representation of the place while remaining unidentifiable. And yet she does not disappear entirely, she uses consistent filters and stickers across her anonymous Snaps, which acts as visual signatures that her existing followers would recognise, even if strangers could not attribute them to a named identity. She is simultaneously anonymous and present, invisible to the public gaze while remaining legible to a trusted inner circle.

In Brunton and Nissenbaum's terms, this is a precise form of obfuscation, or the addition of ambiguous information that degrades the legibility of her presence to potential surveillers without eliminating it (Brunton and Nissenbaum 1). In this case, the ambiguous information is a public Snap without an attributed name, shared by Teena. She is visible but not fully knowable; located but not identifiable. The practice exploits a gap in the platform's architecture. The default assumption that presence and identity are co-extensive is disrupted by a deliberate decoupling of the two. Brunton and Nissenbaum argue that obfuscation is a weapon of the informationally weak. Here that argument acquires a specifically gendered dimension. Women's reasons for withholding identity from public digital space are not merely privacy preferences but safety necessities, shaped by the long history of harassment, stalking and violence that attends women's full visibility in public space. This is same history that Phadke, Khan and Ranade document as the condition of women's access to Indian urban space (Phadke, Khan and Ranade 15).

de Certeau's concept of the tactic illuminates the practice further. The anonymous Snap is an action performed, in de Certeau's formulation, within the field of vision of the dominant order, without the means to withdraw from it to a position of safety (de Certeau 32). The woman cannot refuse to be on the platform; she cannot make herself fully invisible. But she can complicate the meaning of her visibility. The tactic does not give her a proper place from which to plan and accumulate. Instead, it wins partial legibility on terrain she does not control.

Jason Farman's concept of *asynchronous presence* adds a further dimension. The woman who shares an anonymous, geotagged Snap is present in digital space at a location without being physically recoverable from that representation (Farman 89). Her digital presence is real, but it is decoupled from the physical body that a potential harasser would need to locate. Digital and physical bodies are, in this practice, deliberately out of phase. This is a novel and distinctively contemporary form of spatial politics that uses the infrastructure of locative media to claim spatial presence without the vulnerability that full bodily visibility entails.

This practice finds historical precedent in Elizabeth Wilson's analysis of urban anonymity as a feminist good. Wilson argues that the anonymity of the modern city was a liberatory resource for women. The metropolis offered an escape from the suffocating visibility of small community, a space in which to be seen without being fully known (Wilson 7). The anonymous Snap on Snapchat is a digital reinvention of this historically established desire to be present in the urban space, digitally and physically, without the risks that accompany it. The filters and stickers that function as recognisable signatures within the trusted inner circle are the digital equivalent of the knowing glance among intimates.

Goffman's theatrical metaphor of social life is equally illuminating here. The management of presence and absence on Snapchat is a form of impression management, or a deliberate calibration of what is performed for which audience (Goffman 22). The backstage itself is withheld from the general public. The frontstage performance, which is the geotagged Snap, the filter, the visual signature, is offered to a differentiated audience whose composition the woman controls. Platform architecture attempts to collapse this distinction by making all sharing available to all audiences simultaneously; women's tactical use of anonymity features reinstates it, restoring the backstage that the platform had dissolved.

Finally, this practice opens onto a broader theoretical claim about digital presence and urban space. Contradictory to the implicit premise of much locative media criticism, which treats platform use as secondary to or representative of a prior physical spatial experience, this analysis suggests that digital presence actively produces spatial experience. The woman who appears anonymously on the Snap Map is not documenting a pre-existing spatial presence. She is constructing a spatial identity through her negotiation with the platform's architecture. Space, as Massey argues, is produced through social relations (Massey 3). The social relations through which women negotiate their digital visibility are a significant and still under analysed dimension of the production of urban space in the digital age.

7. Conclusion

This paper set out to examine a deceptively simple question: What do women in Kochi do with their phones when they navigate the city? The answer, as the preceding sections have demonstrated, is considerably more complex than the question implies. They preview streets on Google Maps before walking them. They scroll through geotagged Instagram images to access whether a space is hospitable before entering it. They share their live location with a trusted roommate before taking a late-night cab. They post anonymous Snaps to a public map while withholding their names, remaining visible to strangers but legible only to intimates. These practices are ordinary, unremarkable, and in many cases entirely unconscious. Yet, they constitute a form of what this paper has called digital spatial agency, a

tactical, distributed, and collectively produced appropriation of surveillance technologies for the purposes of safety, navigation and the partial reclaiming of urban space.

The central argument of this paper is that women's engagement with locative media is neither simply empowering nor simply surveilling but both simultaneously, and that this simultaneity is precisely what makes it theoretically significant. The same platform that extracts a woman's location data for commercial purposes also gives her a tool for pre-empting danger. The same feature that makes her visible to a corporate data system also allows her to share her whereabouts with someone who cares whether she arrives safely. The same architecture of visibility that threatens to expose her to unwanted scrutiny can be manipulated through Ghost Mode, through decoupling of presence from identity, through the tactical deployment of obfuscation, in order to allow her be present without being fully known. This is de Certeau's tactical logic operating in a specifically gendered and specifically digital register: working within the enemy's field of vision, winning time and partial legibility, rerouting rather than dismantling the systems that constrain.

The cautious optimism of this argument must be held alongside an honest account of its limits. The platforms through which these tactical practices are conducted remain instruments of Zuboff's surveillance capitalism at the structural level. These systems carry the primary purpose of extraction and commodification of behavioural data, including location data that women generate through the very practices of safety-seeking documented here. Women's tactical agency does not change in this structure. Instead, it operates within it. The freedom Ghost Mode offers is a freedom granted by Snap Inc., within terms of service that Snap Inc. can alter. The safety intelligence assembled through Instagram previewing is a by-product of a platform whose primary orientation is commercial image circulation. These are not resources that women control. They are resources that women borrow, on terms they did not set, from systems whose interests are not identical to their own.

The Kochi case offers a specific and generative contribution to the broader question of gendered digital urbanism in the Global South. It demonstrates that the practices through which women negotiate locative media are shaped not only by platform architecture but by the specific histories, social hierarchies, and spatial cultures of the cities they inhabit. It also illustrates that frameworks developed in relation to Western or East Asian cities do not translate automatically to contexts where the risk paradigm governing women's access to public space, as Phadke, Khan and Ranade document, takes a distinctly Indian form. Future research might extend this inquiry in at least two directions. One, toward the caste and class dimension of access to these technologies, which this study has not been able to address fully given its sample. Two, toward the experiences of women who

do not have reliable smartphone access, whose exclusion from informal safety networks documented here represents a significant and underexamined dimension of digital spatial inequality.

What remains is the image of Teena posting her anonymous Snap, which is visible to the Snap Map, invisible to the gaze, legible only to those she trusts. It is a small act. It changes nothing about the structure of the city or the architecture of the platform. And yet, it is not nothing. It is a claim to be present in the city on her own terms. It is a negotiation with a spatial order that has never fully welcomed her. In the age of locative media, this is what the right to the city looks like for many women: Not a revolution, but a tactic. Not a solution, but a practice. It is the ongoing, inventive, daily work of making place.

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