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## Welcome to anonymity 2.0

Kim Arora, TNN | Aug 24, 2014, 04:55AM IST

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*A cluster of apps like Whisper, Yik Yak and Secret is letting users share their dirtiest secrets, darkest desires and just plain old gossip, without revealing their identities*

"I'm in love with my boyfriend's sister," says one post. "Rahul's (name changed) ideas are stolen, and all his work is done by freelancers. He has zero skills of his own," declares yet another. "My husband is immature. He acts so silly at times I want to slap him shut," reads a third. "Handsome master looking for an Indian submissive," writes one more. What do we know about these people? Nothing. These posts have been curated from four different anonymous networks, where people can assume identities, or have none at all. Faces masked, they bare their hearts, posting everything from sleazy gossip to deep, dark secrets.

The trend took off with Whisper, a mobile app that came out in two years ago, and has been gaining traction with others like Secret, Yik Yak and the website Anonyfish.

There are many avenues to do this - mobile apps like Secret that came out in January this year, or other like Whisper and Yik Yak. While you can publish anonymously on these, Anonyfish lets anonymous users have private conversations. A desi social networking site, Sharing Dard, has seen over 1,20,000 people baring their insecurities, pain, and sorrows without disclosing their identities. One can post a "story" under various categories like "Love and Relationship Dard," "Job and Career Dard" and "I Feel Lonely Dard". Here anonymity isn't forced, but encouraged. "People generally avoid using their real name" says the signup page.

On the internet, anonymity has always existed in multifarious ways. It comes in handy for those looking to speak up against abuse or putting forth unpopular political views. Conversely, it is also a mask that protects ruthless trolls. But with these apps, web anonymity has moved to another level. Anonymity 2.0 isn't just an option you can use but engineered into these networks. Unlike blogs or even abusive comments, the user cannot be traced back to an email account.

Secret allows one to share short text posts on a background. The content comes from your circle of friends and though posts don't carry a name, they indicate whether they come from a "friend" or a "friend of friend". Those on Whisper are either random or location-based. You may end up seeing gossip, takedowns or jokes about the startup industry, posts where people are looking to hook up, or indeed, a generous helping of both. If a conversation kicks off in the comments section, it is common to see people exchange Anonyfish IDs to take a conversation off the apps. In previous interviews Anonyfish founder Philip Kaplan has said that he came up with the website when he saw the phenomenon of people creating temporary anonymous IDs to chat with others and arrange meetings privately on these apps. While Whisper has a private chat feature, Secret confirmed that they too will soon roll one out.

Gaurav Rajan, one of the co-founders of Sharing Dard, says they came up with the website to build a support group for those seeking help. "It is important for us to be able to share feelings without social consequences. In India, there is a stigma attached to seeking the help of a psychologist," says Rajan, adding that doctors and counselors sometimes sign up and give advice too.

Noida-based management professional Manish Mahajan (name changed) posted an uninhibited rant about his struggle to persuade his boss to consider another option for a key decision at work. Mahajan, who is also active on mainstream social networks, says he uses Secret to get industry gossip and for "timepass". "Industry gossip and news first turns up here. And for other confessions from friends, I'd call it private voyeurism," says Mahajan.



But could a particularly vicious rant about someone land an anonymous user in legal trouble? Cyber lawyer Pavan Duggal says the law in India is silent on anonymity. "But intermediaries — that is the app or website facilitating the communication — can be held liable in case of misuse under the law," says Duggal.

The popularity of these anonymous apps shows the way we compartmentalize our social and private selves, says digital media consultant Shubho Sengupta. "Even on Facebook, if one posts, say a picture against the Indian flag for Independence Day, that would probably be a public post. But a post about being at odds with your employer will have a restricted audience. There are different layers to who we are," says Sengupta.

For now, the voice from behind the mask rings loud and clear.


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It's a nice way to vent out their feelings. People who have nagging apprehensions, inhibition to speak openly, who have doubts that can be clarified by opening up with such of those, who may at a later stage bite back etc., can freely unwind themselves feel relieved. Such websites are a must had sort of things!

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This is nice to vent out some anger

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