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What factors contribute towards the cultivation of rape culture among young males in Delhi?

*Investigating the sources of misogyny and sexual violence through a case study of
Delhi.*

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Introduction

In December 2012, the eyes of the entire world turned to Delhi, India. The country had just witnessed one of its most heinous crimes. A 23 year old physiotherapy student was brutally gang-raped and tortured by six men in a moving bus on the night of 16th December in South Delhi¹. The victim was referred to as *Nirbhaya* in the media, meaning “the fearless one”². The event elicited global outrage and condemnation with residents of Delhi protesting and holding vigils for the victim outside India Gate demanding retribution for the crime. As a result, four of the accused were found guilty and received death sentences. *Nirbhaya* had a profound impact on the discourse concerning women’s safety in the country and uncovered the deep-rooted sexism that shadows the problem of gendered violence in urban Delhi. Even in the aftermath of the incident, high ranking individuals in the police, judiciary and the government were succumbing to the patriarchal maxim of “boys will be boys”³ and instead blamed women for wearing what they called “provocative clothing”⁴. Since then, almost 11 years have passed and little has changed systemically or socially. The perceived ubiquity of sexual violence in India was surveyed by the Thomson Reuters Foundation in 2018 which ranked India as the “most dangerous country for women”⁵ in the world. Just last year, Delhi Police reported that on average, six rapes are registered in the city each day⁶ dubbing Delhi as the “rape capital” of India

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¹ BBC News. (2020, March 20). *Nirbhaya case: Four Indian men executed for 2012 Delhi bus rape and murder*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-51969961>

² Ibid

³ Basu Roy, Sharanya, and Sayantan Ghosh Dastidar. “Why Do Men Rape? Understanding the Determinants of Rapes in India.” *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 8, May 2018, pp. 1435–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1460200>.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Goldsmith, Belinda, and Meka Beresford. “India Most Dangerous Country for Women with Sexual Violence Rife - Global Poll.” *Reuters*, 26 June 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/women-dangerous-poll-idINKBN1JM076>. Accessed 4 Sept. 2023.

⁶ Press Trust of India. “Delhi Records 17% Rise in Crimes against Women, 6 Rapes Reported Daily.” *India Today*, 12 Aug. 2022, <https://www.indiatoday.in/cities/delhi/story/delhi-rise-in-crimes-against-women-6-rapes-reported-daily-1987001-2022-08-12>. Accessed 4 Sept. 2023.

⁷ Sengar, Shweta. “In Delhi, The ‘Rape Capital Of India’, Five Women Were Raped Each Day In First Quarter Of 2018.” *India Times*, 7 May 2018, https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/in-delhi-the-rape-capital-of-india-five-women-were-raped-each-day-in-first-quarter-of-2018_-344881.html. Accessed 4 Sept. 2023.

Scholars explaining these trends often focus on sociological and cultural contexts contribute to sexual violence. In particular, researchers have studied the role an individual's socio-economic background plays in perpetrating violence against women.

Chakraborty et. al⁸ conducted a longitudinal cross-sectional study of crime against women in India's 28 states using data published by National Crime Record Bureau over the period of 2001-02 to 2014-15. They found that social deprivation and lower socio-economic status can motivate violence against women⁹. Men from low-income backgrounds have fewer avenues for upward social mobility. They thus experience the psychological effects of relative deprivation including the loss of agency to improve their lives and instead substitute the frustration and desire for control by subjecting vulnerable populations such as women and children to violence¹⁰. This enables them to manufacture dominance and authority. The lack of education and awareness further encourages such acts creating a patriarchal apparatus positioning the man as the central authoritative figure.

Other scholars such as Professor Devleena Ghosh point to India's historical caste system that construct power asymmetries between the upper-caste (*Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas*) and the so-called lower-caste (*Dalits*) emboldening those more privileged to engage in heinous crimes against members from the marginalised communities with much impunity^{11,12}.

Whilst both the socio-economic lens and the casteist explanation help in understanding prevalence of sexual violence in many cases especially in rural India, they fail to shed light on

⁸ Chakraborty, Chandrima, et al. "Crime against Women in India: A State Level Analysis." *Virtual Commons - Bridgewater State University*, 2021, <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss5/1/>. Accessed 4 Sept. 2023.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Narang, Anya. "The Not-So-Hidden Crime: India's Rape Crisis." *MIR*, 26 Sept. 2022, <https://www.mironline.ca/the-not-so-hidden-crime-indias-rape-crisis/>. Accessed 4 Sept. 2023.

¹² Fernando, Gavin. "Who Are India's Dalits, and Why Are They Particularly Vulnerable to Gendered Sexual Violence?" *SBS News*, 2 Oct. 2020, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/who-are-indias-dalits-and-why-are-they-particularly-vulnerable-to-gendered-sexual-violence/a983nn5uf>. Accessed 4 Sept. 2023.

more recent incidents of gendered violence that disseminate from young educated, upper-class and affluent members of Delhi.

In 2020, news of a social media group chat on Instagram and Twitter surfaced called the “Bois Locker Room” involving male high school and college students from Delhi, aged around 16-19, who shared images of minor girls and made sexually explicit remarks in addition to threatening gang rape¹³. They objectified these girls, many of whom were their classmates, and states “we can rape her easily” and “I will come whenever you say. We will gang rape her”¹⁴. When the chats were leaked, the group members resorted to intimidation tactics against anyone who shared the screenshots, even threatening them with rape and creating another group on Snapchat because the platform automatically deletes the conversation¹⁵. This case is by no means an isolated event. On the same day as the chats surfaced, a subreddit was created by students from Sri Ramaswami Memorial University called *r/srmbeauties* where explicit pictures of female students were exchanged and crudely discussed¹⁶. Just recently, in January of 2023, a 17 year old boy in Delhi was convicted of sexually harassing and stalking a 14 year old girl on social media¹⁷. These boys belong to affluent neighbourhoods in South Delhi, a relatively posh area and attend private schools¹⁸. Hence, the explanations of relative deprivation concerning lower socio-economic status or caste differences (since the victims also belonged to relatively privileged backgrounds) fail to uncover the genesis of how younger male students belonging to affluent and progressive families who are socio-economically positioned to possess greater awareness, can still hold deeply sexist and violent views against women.

¹³ Sanjay, Satviki. “The ‘Bois Locker Room’ Chat Exposes India’s Rape Culture, and How It Starts so Young.” *Vice*, 4 May 2020, https://www.vice.com/en/article/dyganm/the-bois-locker-room-chat-exposes-indias-rape-culture-and-how-it-starts-so-young?utm_source=reddit.com. Accessed 4 Sept. 2023.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Outlook Web Desk. “Delhi Police Arrests 17-Year-Old For Stalking And Harassing 14-Year-Old Girl.” *Outlook India*, 27 Jan. 2023, <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/delhi-police-arrests-17-year-old-for-stalking-and-harassing-14-year-old-girl-news-257088>. Accessed 4 Sept. 2023.

¹⁸ Ibid

Survey of the literature on gendered violence in educational institutes in urban centres, hints at a gap in scholarship on how these sexist attitudes are cemented in youth especially in metropolitan spaces. One study by Burnett et.al examined how rape culture on colleges campuses in the United States perpetuates due to the ambiguity around what constitutes rape which prevents victims from confidently communicating and seeking justice¹⁹. A paper by Weitz argues that rape culture in colleges in the US stems from psychological traits exhibited by self-centred individuals seeking dominance or popularity²⁰ but also recognises the importance of sociological factors including social gender norms in discerning outlook towards consent. His research forms the basis of the study conducted by Burnett et.al on date rape and the culture of fraternities that encourage sexual violence in the US²¹. Whilst psychological explanations are insightful in dissecting the individual personalities of perpetrators, these aspects are not divorced from the sociological backdrop against which these crimes occur.

As such, limited systematic research exists on the prevalence of gendered violence in educational institutes in India broadly. A 2018 study by the University Grants Commission (UGC) of the ministry of Education reported that 171 out of the 188 universities mentioned reported complaints of sexual harassment often orchestrated by fellow classmates²². Given that India has the largest youth population in the world with around 66% of the total population (more than 808

¹⁹ Burnett, Ann, et al. "Communicating/Muting Date Rape: A Co-Cultural Theoretical Analysis of Communication Factors Related to Rape Culture on a College Campus." *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, vol. 37, no. 4, Nov. 2009, pp. 465–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909880903233150>.

²⁰ Weitz, Albert. "Communicative and Perceptual Factors Contributing to Date Rape: Interviews with Perpetrators." ProQuest, 2002, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/d5aea03b2f28d9e433949fdc951f9596/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>. Accessed 5 Sept. 2023.

²¹ Burnett, Ann, et al. "Communicating/Muting Date Rape: A Co-Cultural Theoretical Analysis of Communication Factors Related to Rape Culture on a College Campus." *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, vol. 37, no. 4, Nov. 2009, pp. 465–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909880903233150>.

²² Sarkar, Susanti. "Rising Sexual Assaults on Indian College Campuses." *Media India Group*, 6 July 2021, <https://mediaindia.eu/society/rising-sexual-assaults-on-indian-college-campuses/>. Accessed 5 Sept. 2023.

million) being below the age of 35 according to the International Labour Organization²³, there is a greater need for extensive research into how sexism among young people can be mitigated. These institutes are a microcosm of the larger Indian society and therefore understanding the spatial peculiarities of violence against women in schools and colleges offers an insight into preventive strategies and pathways for change to improve security for women and conceive sociological transformation for future generations.

Research Question & Potential Impact

This paper seeks to investigate what factors contribute towards the cultivation of rape culture among young males in Delhi.

Delhi has been selected as a case study for three primary reasons. First, Delhi reported the highest cases of rape among 19 cities which had a population of more than two million²⁴. The NCRB report states that 1,226 rape cases were registered in the Delhi, the national capital in 2021 alone and it is the only metropolitan city that registered more than 1,000 rape cases²⁵. Second, Delhi offers a pan-Indian perspective on gendered violence as it is the city with the highest share of inter-state migrants attracting students from different parts of India to attend educational institutes in the capital city²⁶. There are roughly 6000 schools in Delhi and around 200 higher

²³ International Labour Organization. "Decent Work for Youth in India." *ILO*, 17 Apr. 2012, https://www.ilo.org/newdelhi/info/WCMS_175936/lang--en/index.htm. Accessed 5 Sept. 2023.

²⁴ The Wire. "Nearly 20% Increase in Rapes Across India in 2021, Rajasthan Had Highest Cases: NCRB." *The Wire*, 2022, <https://thewire.in/women/crimes-against-women-rape-cases-india-2021-ncrb-data#:~:text=Nearly%2064%25%20of%20the%20rape,the%2018%2D30%20age%20group.&text=Delhi%20once%20again%20reported%20the,the%20national%20capital%20in%202021>. Accessed 5 Sept. 2023.

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Kawoosa, Vijdan Mohammad. "Delhi Has Highest Share of Inter-State Migrants." *Hindustan Times*, 28 July 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/delhi-has-highest-share-of-inter-state-migrants/story-QCYXSWInSYAJbNb25ljcPL.html>. Accessed 5 Sept. 2023.

educational institutions²⁷. Third, Delhi is the second wealthiest city in India²⁸ allowing us to understand how misogynistic attitudes are cultivated among the urban-elite strata that has endangered the safety of young girls and women in educational institutions and online spaces.

Therefore, investigating the structural and social genesis behind rape-culture in Delhi's educational institutions as a case study offers an opportunity to contribute to scholarship on gendered violence that has conventionally neglected to analyse the motivating factors of progressive and financially privileged young male perpetrators. This proposal can help in discovering how a myriad of social and structural factors enable young perpetrators of sexual violence that go beyond the conventional wisdom which places the blame on patriarchy, low-income backgrounds and lack of access to resources. Furthermore, research on this topic will illuminate paths to actualise productive change that targets the foundation of sexist ideology and looks beyond reactive measures which seek to solely punish aggressors without outlining preventative frameworks to protect women in the future. Understanding the origins of rape culture can assist in informing policy recommendations required to prevent the growth of violent attitudes in men and protect women.

Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative framework by conducting content analysis on secondary testimonies, interviews and perspectives shared online as well as of popular Bollywood songs.

The content analysis of social media discourse on gendered violence in Delhi was sourced primarily from Reddit from the years 2019-2023 on two subreddits namely: r/Delhi with 514,000 members and r/India with 1.9 million members. In total, ten posts and 43 comments were selected to be studied. Reddit was selected for four central reasons. First, Reddit's user interface

²⁷ The Indian Express. "Delhi Govt: 345 New Schools Opened Last Year." *The Indian Express*, 9 Dec. 2015, <https://indianexpress.com/article/education/delhi-govt-345-new-schools-opened-last-year/>. Accessed 5 Sept. 2023.

²⁸ ---. "Mumbai Richest Indian City with Total Wealth of \$820 Billion, Delhi Comes Second: Report." *The Indian Express*, 26 Feb. 2017, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/mumbai-richest-indian-city-with-total-wealth-of-820-billion-delhi-comes-second-report-4544685/>. Accessed 5 Sept. 2023.

makes it easier to search for posts with certain keywords or entire sentences unlike other social media applications. Second, the existence of subreddits means that discussions on topics concern the sub-community of the platform and most likely includes participants who actually belong or relate to that subreddit. For example, in the subreddit r/Delhi, all posts are related directly to the city of Delhi and members posting there typically are residents of or have lived in Delhi which helps in securing more accurate or authentic data than other social media platforms. Third, compared to other popular social media apps such as Instagram or Twitter, Reddit allows for long-format posting where individuals can write more extensively and respond to posts made by other individuals on a host of topics. This provides richness in data collection with in-depth accounts shared by Reddit users. Fourth, social media is also more accessible to a younger age group therefore tailoring the research to focus on the target population of our study as the majority of Reddit users tend to be between 18-29 years of age²⁹. Despite these benefits to selecting Reddit to conduct content analysis, the online nature of the research invites several constraints including sampling bias and the inability to control for external factors which will be examined further in the limitations sections. Observing the discursive nature of communication on safety of women in an online space can illustrate collective perceptions towards gendered violence and highlight those voices that are marginalised in the media such as the first hand experiences of girls with misogyny in Delhi.

Cinema, music and art often reflects norms and cultural perceptions towards different communities in a society. This is more true for Bollywood—the Indian film industry which is the largest in the world averaging a production of 1000 films each year³⁰. I conducted textual analysis on 15 popular Bollywood “item songs” from 1991-2023 ranked by Spotify³¹ and curated

²⁹ Gitnux. “Reddit User Statistics And Trends in 2023 • GITNUX.” *GITNUX Market Data*, 24 Mar. 2023, <https://blog.gitnux.com/reddit-user-statistics/#:~:text=FAQs-,What%20is%20the%20average%20age%20of%20Reddit%20users%3F,18%20and%2029%20years%20old>. Accessed 5 Sept. 2023.

³⁰ NFI Team. “What Is Bollywood? Everything You Need To Know.” *NFI*, 19 May 2022, <https://www.nfi.edu/what-is-bollywood/>. Accessed 5 Sept. 2023.

³¹ Sengar, Shweta. “In Delhi, The ‘Rape Capital Of India’, Five Women Were Raped Each Day In First Quarter Of 2018.” *India Times*, 7 May 2018, https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/in-delhi-the-rape-capital-of-india-five-women-were-raped-each-day-in-first-quarter-of-2018_-344881.html. Accessed 4 Sept. 2023.

by Ratan Deep Singh for *The Witty Blog*³². The analysis helped identify recurring themes that were further triangulated by secondary interviews of leading actors, actresses and filmmakers sourced through news channels and online magazines.

Content Analysis on Reddit Comments

After surveying 43 total comments under ten Reddit posts from 2019-2023 in r/Delhi and r/India subreddits respectively, I highlighted 167 observations within those comments and posts that I categorised into 11 themes or codes. The following are the themes that I created with their descriptions:

1. **Patriarchy/Sexism:** Mention of misogyny, patriarchal values or sexist attitudes.
2. **Public Transport:** Experiences of assault or harassment on public transportation.
3. **Emotional Impact:** The effect of harassment on the victim.
4. **Online Harassment:** Sexual harassment, threats and blackmailing online.
5. **Victim Shaming:** Blaming or shaming the victim of sexual harassment.
6. **Sex Education:** Access to sex education.
7. **Harassed as a Minor:** Harassment experienced as a minor aged below 18.
8. **Catcalling:** being catcalled on the streets. Passing of suggestive remarks in public.
9. **Schools & Colleges:** Harassment experienced at educational institutes.
10. **Molestation & Harassment:** Groping, tearing of clothes, inappropriate touching.
11. **Institutional Negligence:** Institutional and administrative negligence to provide safety including failure of police, judiciary, government, school boards and other relevant authorities. Also any mention of the abuse of power by authorities is recorded under this code.

³² Singh, Ratan Deep. "30 Best Item Songs in Bollywood That Will Make You Shake a Leg." *The Witty Blog*, 29 May 2020, <https://www.thewittyblog.com/best-item-songs-in-bollywood/>. Accessed 5 Sept. 2023.

Content Analysis Reddit 2019-2023

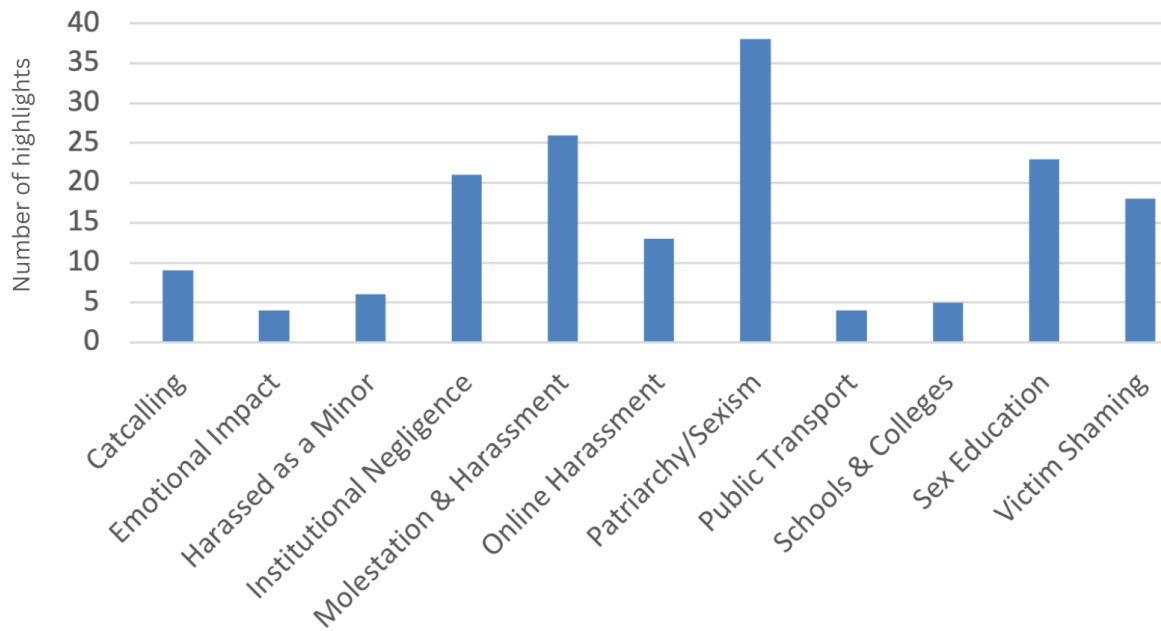


Figure 1.0

The graphical representation of the number of highlights per code is shown above in Figure 1.0. Patriarchy/sexism were most frequently mentioned or alluded to at 38 times. Followed by experiences of molestation and harassment at 26. Sex education was referred to 23 times and institutional negligence was described 21 times. Victim shaming was mentioned 18 times. These trends will be further examined in the following subsections.

Molestation/Harassment

When I searched the term “harassment” in r/Delhi, the first post to emerge was titled “How often have you faced harassment/eve teasing as a women?” posted by u/LostCheck7249 in 2023. The post detailed the experiences of the reddit user who described herself as “a 29 F (female) Delhiite”. She stated that she had experienced harassment in the city several times beginning as a minor at parties, gyms, public transport, on the streets and in online spaces as well. She mentioned being catcalled whilst walking in public areas, being groped in Delhi metro and harassed online. Several comments under her post were made by other reddit users who recalled

their experiences with harassment in Delhi highlighting the frequency of gendered violence in the city. One user whose handle is u/shishtar said that she has experienced harassment since she was 14 years of age and she is currently 23 years old. A male reddit user by the handle u/Dhruv_25 said “Every single women I’ve known (family or otherwise) has been teased, harassed or in some cases even sexually assaulted more more often than I could think”. One user—u/makOmak9—specifically mentioned how Bollywood normalises catcalling and therefore desensitises people against misogynistic behaviour. Online harassment was also frequently cited with u/eatsleeprepeat101_ explaining a personal experience similar to Bois Locker Room wherein her male classmates had made a group chat sharing pictures of girls including herself and making sexually explicit comments about their bodies. She mentioned that the incident had a lasting traumatic emotional impact on her.

Patriarchy/Sexism

One post by u/SuddenCancel on r/Delhi from 2019 titled “what is the core reason for Delhi being the most unsafe metro city for women?” received one response by u/Bespectacledboy who blamed entrenched patriarchal values for the rise in violence against women in Delhi. The user said “the still prevalent ideas of brahmanical patriarchy and the different ideals and expectations from men and women which has traditionally caused a power imbalance between men and women [is the reason why Delhi is unsafe]”. The user continued saying “Delhi lies within the heart of North Indian culture, and being the capital attracts people from all across the country. And in North India especially, there is a tendency to exert your masculinity on your surroundings...men here want to convey just how much of [a] man they are.” This comment elucidates the idea that progress and independence of women poses a threat to the status quo which supports the dominance of men. Therefore, men transgress in violent patterns to reassert their authority culminating in gendered violence. To highlight how patriarchy especially impacts the youth, one user by the handle u/angryfeminichi commented that “this mentality starts from home where male siblings have an upper hand at home, same in school and in society in general”. User u/pramodrsankar similarly mentioned that gendered power asymmetries begin at home where boys are given preferential treatment over girls which encourages young boys to

feel entitled to a girl's body and treat her as an object. U/angryfeminichi also mentioned how rape and sex are generally a taboo subjects in Indian society and rape in particular is closely associated with a girl's chastity and honour. As such, according to u/angryfeminichi, "most women don't speak up or come out with complaints" for the fear of societal stigma and shame. The patriarchal architecture of Indian society therefore relegates itself to blaming the victim instead of punishing the perpetrator, something mentioned by u/DrMehhhh, u/cumfortmeples and u/deleted.

Institutional Negligence

References to the problem of institutional negligence were closely followed by examples of the same occurring in educational institutes. One user with the handle u/Harisimin mentioned the 2019 *Gargi* incident, where men climbed walls of Delhi's Gargi Women College during a college fest and molested the students there³³. One post by u/No-More-Donuts-Pls in 2023 pleaded for public support to help students in a similar case to the *Gargi* incident that took place in Indraprastha College for Women in Delhi. They too witnessed men climb their campus walls and molest the students there. The user alleges that the college administration and police failed to take action, instead, they manhandled the student protestors who were seeking justice. The lack of swift action by teachers, administrators and police were recurring themes stated by u/FutureFC, u/angryfeminichi, u/Clean_Quote_3408, u/alilacdesiderium, u/DrMehhhh among others, explaining how victims of harassment are discouraged from speaking out. One user by the handle u/PretentiousF**ktard also mentioned how young boys involved in cases like the Bois Locker Room never get convicted because of their wealth and family connections. U/DrMehhhh stated that disregard for the victim begins with the government that harbours misogynistic attitudes which are internalised by the masses. The user continues by citing the example of the *Bilkis Bano* gang-rape case where "Prime Minister Narendra Modi approved the premature release of 11 men who gangraped a pregnant Muslim woman and murdered 14

³³ India Today Web Desk. "They Masturbated at Us: Delhi's Gargi College Students Say Group of Men Broke in, Groped and Harassed Girls." *India Today*, 9 Feb. 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/gargi-college-students-harassed-molested-by-drunken-men-revere-festival-1644693-2020-02-09>. Accessed 5 Sept. 2023.

members of her family, including her three-year-old daughter”³⁴. This creates an atmosphere of impunity and a lack of consequences as mentioned by u/Clean_Quote_3408 encouraging more violence and silencing victims. Furthermore, users such as u/Goryan_nu_daffa_karo stated that misogynistic attitudes are also exhibited by the police which dissuade girls from seeking help. She outlined her experience trying to receive assistance from a policewoman after being harassed during her college festival in Delhi. The policewoman however proceeded to blame her for wearing “short clothes” and the user quoted the policewoman saying “I [as in the u/Goryan_nu_daffa_karo] had no right to complain about rape”.

Sex Education

The need for better sex education in schools and colleges was frequently cited. One user by the handle u/alilacdesiderium mentioned that despite studying in an expensive private school in Delhi, they had a poor sex education course. The user wrote that students were separated by gender with the boys watching a “football game” and the girls receiving a talk on “dress[ing] properly avoid any incidents...and it was on us [the girls] to make sure we didn't excite [the boys]”. This experience with poor delivery of sex education was echoed by other users with the handles u/sweetmangolover and u/Clean_Quote_3408. They mentioned that the lack of proper sex education in educational institutes and availability of porn through the internet distorts the perceptions of youth towards sex, gender roles and consent. U/sweetmangolover emphasised the importance of teaching consent by stating “the most important part of sex education is teaching the concepts of CONSENT and CONSEQUENCE” (capitalisation is part of the original comment). But another user by the handle u/nanon_2 had a different take from u/sweetmangolover. U/nanon_2 disagreed with the idea that the lack of sex education was behind the high rise in crimes against girls in educational institutes, instead placing the blame on societal norms that favour patriarchy, gender disparities and dehumanisation of women. U/nanon_2 said “you can teach consent all you want but if you don't believe women can give consent that's a society problem”.

³⁴ Pandey, Geeta. “Bilkis Bano: India PM Modi's Government Okayed Rapists' Release.” *BBC News*, 17 Aug. 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-62574247>. Accessed 5 Sept. 2023.

Content Analysis on Item Songs

During the textual analysis of the comments shared on Reddit, several users referenced the influence of Bollywood and item songs as contributing factors towards gendered violence and misogyny. “Item song” is a dance number featuring a hypersexualised woman who seduces the male-protagonist of the film whilst wearing provocative clothing dancing in the presence of many men³⁵. The actress dancing in the item song is called an “item girl”.³⁶ A video published by *The Swaddle* on YouTube titled “Why Are ‘Item’ Numbers Still Relevant?” examined the history and contemporary debates surrounding popular item songs³⁷. What was particularly interesting however were some of the comments under the video that demonstrated the divided opinion on item songs being problematic in lieu of sexism and objectification of women. One user with the handle @selfproclaimedsinger9407 stated that the entire terminology of “item girl” is problematic and demeaning to women. The user continued that the filming of the item songs use camera angles that fixate on the body of the actress, hypersexualising and objectifying her for the male gaze. Another commentator with the handle @archiem654 echoed those statements and said that the songs commodify women, presenting them as objects to satiate the men instead of according them any agency. But one user with the handle @karnveer8953 disagreed and said that they see no issue with item songs for two reasons. First, Western pop artists also indulge in hypersexualised portrayals of models in their music videos and this helps garner views which is imperative for business. Second, the individuals partaking in these projects including the actress, consented to the dance which is why these songs are not problematic from their point of view. This explanation was contested by another user with the handle @r.h.6249 who said that hypersexualised filming of the dance is solely done through the male gaze which subverts any attempts at female empowerment but that Western songs of artists like Doja Cat that also feature

³⁵ Shewade, Ruchi Ravi. “Assessing the Role of Items Songs from Bollywood Movies in Delineating Gender Roles in India.” *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, vol. 30, no. 1, Dec. 2022, pp. 119–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2022.2152455>.

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ The Swaddle. “Why Are ‘Item’ Numbers Still Relevant?” *YouTube*, Video, 18 June 2022, https://youtu.be/rx8XS_srsjg?si=wUptnIQTUKI6caUb. Accessed 5 Sept. 2023.

sexualised portrayals in her music video do so through the female gaze assigning more agency to the women present in that project.

Despite the problematic perception towards women exhibited in item songs, they play a major role in the collective consciences of Indian society. Children as young as four years old and elders as old as 70 years old sing and dance to these songs in weddings, festivals, and other events. As such, it is imperative to identify what messaging these songs provide to the public and its consequent impact on shaping youth.

I selected 15 popular item songs from 1991-2023 and conducted content analysis on their lyrics categorising the recurring themes under the following five labels:

1. **Metaphors and Innuendos:** use of metaphors and innuendos comparing women to objects and implying sexual behaviours or acts
2. **Sexualisation and Objectification:** sexualisation and objectification of women and female body for male pleasure and male gaze
3. **Consent:** disregard of a woman's refusal or hesitation to give consent to the man
4. **Commodification:** mention of money
5. **Infantilization:** the infantilization of women, deeming them incapable of exercising their agency.

A total of 202 observations were made that fit under one of the themes. Repeating stanzas or lines from the songs such as the chorus were only counted once.

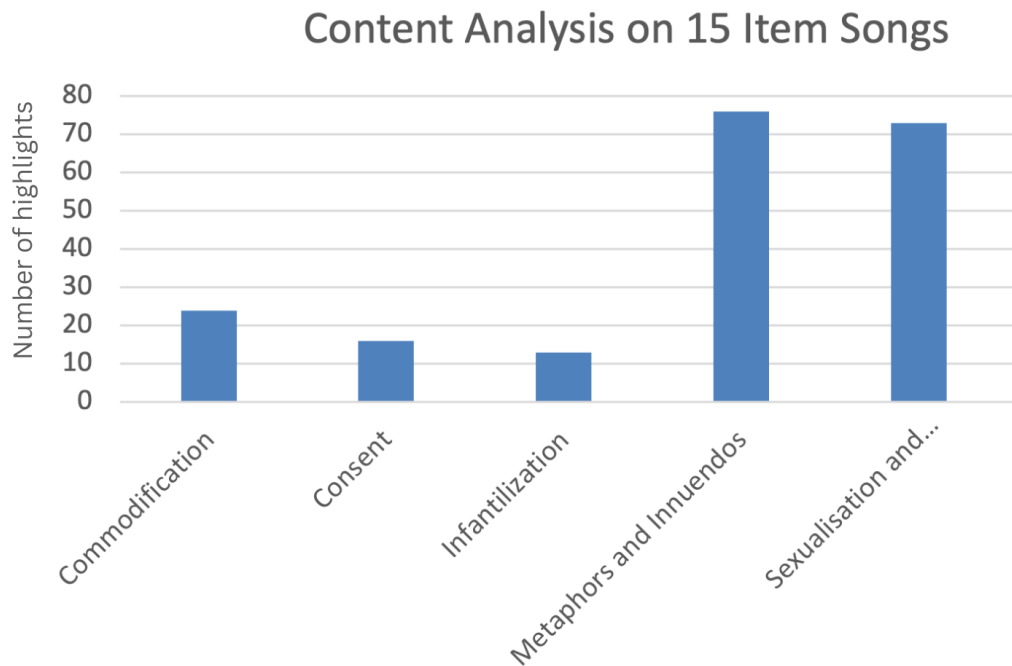


Figure 2.0

The above figure 2.0 is a graphical representation of the content analysis conducted on the 15 popular item songs. Metaphors and innuendos were most frequently observed at 76 in total followed by lyrics that sexualised and objectified women at 73 observations. There were 24 references to the commodification of women, 16 highlights where the song suggested a disregard for consent, and 13 instances of infantilization of women.

A problem with the use of innuendos in item songs is that the metaphors are often crafted to compare the woman with an object thereby dehumanising her. One song used in the content analysis was *Chipkale Saiyan Fevicol Se* released in 2012 in the movie *Dabangg 2* with lyrics written by Sajid-Wajid and Ashraf Ali. A verse belonging to the chorus of this songs goes as follows in hindi: *Main to tandoori murgi hoon yaar*

Gatkaa le saiyyan alcohol se meaning, “I am a tandoori chicken, swallow me o beloved with alcohol³⁸. Another song called *Aa re Pritam pyaare* released in same year by the same lyricists feature a verse saying *Pal u ke neeche dabake rakha hai Utha doon toh hungama ho* meaning that “It is hidden under my veil, if I lift it, there will be commotion”³⁹. Some of these lyrics also feature sexualisation and objectification of women such as this verse *O mehfil ta sajadi te hilte dulte tooh* meaning “a celebration becomes vibrant when the butts shake” from the song *Tooh* released in 2013 which opens with a sequence of women lined up with their backside facing the camera whilst a man walks through staring at them⁴⁰. The hypersexualisation of women in these songs gives the male protagonist a sense of entitlement over the female dancer whose sole purpose is to satisfy the men thereby commodifying their bodies for the male gaze. The song *Pinky* even explicitly features a back and forth dialogue between the female dancer and the male protagonist who asks her what would she like and she responds with *Cash chahiye mujhe cash chahiye* meaning “I need cash, I need cash”⁴¹. The lyrics then state *Paisa pekh tamasha dekh Nachegi Pinky ful too late* which translates to “throw the money and then watch the entertainment *Pinky* will dance till late in the night”⁴². Again, the commodification of women in these lyrics demeans them, rids them of their agency and characterises them as objects for male pleasure. Some lyrics inflate the male entitlement with phrases such as “why do you throw tantrums, I don't like it, why do you question so much, I don't listen that much” in song *Tareefan*⁴³. The song here is referring to the hesitation of the actress to give consent for sex which the male protagonist ignores by infantilizing her and being persistent in his demands. Majority of these song lyrics are written by men and directed through the male gaze.

³⁸ Bolly Meaning. “Chipkale Saiyan Fevicol Se Dabangg 2 Lyrics Translation.” *Bollymeaning*, 2013, <http://www.bollymeaning.com/2012/11/chipkale-saiyan-fevicol-se-dabangg-2.html>. Accessed 5 Sept. 2023.

³⁹ Filmy Quotes. “Aa Re Pritam Pyaare Lyrics Translation.” *Hindi Bollywood Songs*, 2012, <https://www.filmyquotes.com/songs/1657>. Accessed 5 Sept. 2023.

⁴⁰ ---. “Tooh Lyrics Translation.” *Hindi Bollywood Songs*, 2013, <https://www.filmyquotes.com/songs/2576>. Accessed 5 Sept. 2023.

⁴¹ ---. “Pinky Lyrics Translation.” *Hindi Bollywood Songs*, 2013, <https://www.filmyquotes.com/songs/2413>. Accessed 5 Sept. 2023.

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ ---. “Tareefan Lyrics Translation.” *Bollymeaning*, 2018, <http://www.bollymeaning.com/2018/05/tareefan-badshah-lyrics-meaning.html>. Accessed 5 Sept. 2023.

Veteran actress Shabana Azmi has criticised such depiction of women in item songs and the lyrics that accompany them saying “they’ve been put in a film for the only purpose of titillation and nothing else”⁴⁴. She went on to say that when a “four-year-old girl is dancing on [an item song], you are leading to the sexualisation of children and the... people who are encouraging her are just as responsible”⁴⁵. Other individuals belonging to the Indian film industry like director Karan Johar have also come on record to say “the moment you put a woman in the centre and a thousand men looking at her lustingly, it's setting the wrong example. As a filmmaker I have made those mistakes and I will never do it again”⁴⁶.

Still, others believe that item songs are an expression of sensuality and a celebration of female empowerment. Semiotic composition study on item songs by Shewade maintain that the centralisation of the item girl in songs cannot be divorced from its heteronormative, patriarchal and objectifying film context⁴⁷. And so even when the item girl attempts to demonstrate sexual empowerment, her performing the role with the same portrayal of hypersexuality and in the presence of men through provocative dances, she is still succumbing to the male gaze and reaffirming the status quo.

Furthermore, situating the male protagonist as being more powerful and engaging in acts that constitute stalking, harassment, objectification among others, these songs can socialise impressionable youth distorting their perceptions towards sex and relationships. In tandem with the lack of proper sex education, these songs and movies substitute healthy discussions about sex creating unrealistic expectations regarding relationships and promoting misogynistic behaviour.

⁴⁴ Sharma, Priyanka. “Item Songs Show Women Surrendering to Male Gaze: Shabana Azmi.” *The Indian Express*, 5 Mar. 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/shabana-azmi-item-songs-show-women-surrendering-to-male-gaze-5087032/>. Accessed 5 Sept. 2023.

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Satija, Garima. “KJo Admits Of Objectifying Women In Item Songs, Promises To Never Do It Again In His Movies.” *India Times*, 2 Dec. 2017, <https://www.indiatimes.com/entertainment/celebs/kjo-admits-of-objectifying-women-in-item-songs-promises-to-never-do-it-again-in-his-movies-334859.html>. Accessed 5 Sept. 2023.

⁴⁷ Shewade, Ruchi Ravi. “Assessing the Role of Items Songs from Bollywood Movies in Delineating Gender Roles in India.” *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, vol. 30, no. 1, Dec. 2022, pp. 119–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2022.2152455>.

These songs glorify a disregard for consent for example and show the protagonist insisting despite numerous refusals by the heroine. These behaviours can often translate to the collective society when young boys feel entitled to harass their fellow female classmates because they do not grasp rejection and perceive their refusal as a challenge to their masculinity and power. These songs also normalise catcalling and objectification of a woman's body which can translate to boys passing sexual remarks on a girl's picture on social media.

Given how prevalent such songs are in Indian society, transgressing social classes and age groups, it is important to support future research on the direct psychological and sociological impact these songs have on youth.

Key Insights

The research conducted on investigating the sources of misogyny among young males in Delhi uncovered some key actionable insights.

1. Given that sex is a taboo subject in India, the incorporation of sex education in schools may encounter much resistance from parents. And as one user on reddit (u/nanon_2) stated, the problem of sexual violence cannot be resolved just merely by teaching consent. In order to socialise young boys into recognising the importance of consent, they first have to unlearn patriarchal and sexist values that objectify and demean women. Often such attitudes are adopted at a young age and a cognitive dissonance emerges as children are subjected to one pattern of behaviour that upholds the status quo in their homes and another at school which aims to dismantle that very behaviour.
2. Patriarchal values that posit men as the authoritative figures in society permeate class delineations. Boys receive preferential treatment in comparison to their female counterparts promoting a sense of entitlement and power asymmetry within the society from a young age. Furthermore, rape and gendered violence broadly are often described as being natural reactions elicited due to the clothing or behavioural patterns of the victim.

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3. Institutional negligence stemming from the internalisation of sexist values and corruption obstruct the path toward justice for victims thereby discouraging them from speaking. Perpetrators belonging to affluent families have connections to prevent the registration of cases and are able to bribe officials to ensure impunity.
 4. Film and art play an important role in socialising behaviour of young males. Item songs in particular taint expectations of sex and relationships, cementing patriarchal and sexist values in the minds of young boys which can lead to the objectification and dehumanisation of women.

Limitations

The research adopted only a qualitative methodology due to limited data on the demographics of perpetrators of gendered violence and limited resources. As such, data collection from social media sites offers only a partial view of the problem of sexual violence and also operates to reinforce the negative experiences solely as these spaces often are echo chambers reflecting a monolithic perspective. Furthermore, there is no mechanism to verify the authenticity, accuracy and honesty of these statements shared on Reddit and control for any external factors influencing their comments. The content analysis derived from the study of 15 item songs does not posit any correlation or causation between the popularity of these songs and the direct impact of its messaging on youth. The analysis conducted is primarily triangulated through the statements made by the commentators on YouTube, Reddit as well as secondary interviews of individuals belonging to the film industry. Future research combining vast statistical models to understand the spatial and demographic characteristics of rape in educational institutes and interviews to dissect the relation between cinema and societal norms needs to be studied to mitigate the aforementioned limitations.

Conclusion

This paper sought to investigate the genesis of sexual violence and misogynistic attitudes among young male students in Delhi, India. Through a qualitative methodological framework of content analysis surveying social media platforms and online news sites, this study identified four main

contributors to the cultivation of gendered violence in young males namely: patriarchy, lack of sex education, institutional negligence, and lastly, the role of Bollywood in perpetuating misogynistic attitudes towards women, sex and relationships. It is however important to be cautious about attributing these findings to cultural explanations alone as these factors are not intrinsic to Indian society but are constructed through discursive patterns over time. In fact one can ask the same question regarding why people belonging to affluent and elite strata of society who are predisposed to possess greater awareness in countries like the United States or Canada engage in violent behaviour towards women. Gendered violence is prevalent in these societies as well and largely affects young people in colleges and schools despite access to sex education. Understanding how deep-rooted notions of patriarchy, sexism and violence can be dismantled thus require a cross-sectional examination in the future to help build spaces for dialogue about women safety across cultures.

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