



The Role Of Popular Media On Street Harassment – A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

Street harassment is the most subtle form of sexual harassment and has become so common that people have started accepting it as a part of the social fabric of our lives. Popular media continues to show behaviours of street harassment like stalking, whistling, or following as flirtatious and a part of courtship. The media plays a very important role in our understanding of acceptable behaviour and provides the audience with a cultural script that entails the norms of society. The study aimed to explore the role of popular media on street harassment through the voices of the women victims of street harassment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among 22 women who had experienced street harassment one or more times in the last year, in the age range of 18-33 years. Thematic analysis was conducted on the transcribed data, and three subthemes emerged -Romanticising the harassment, Media as a socialising agent and Manufacturing female consent; with an overarching theme, "Media as a script for entitlement and vulgarity". This study seeks to initiate a conversation among policy makers, film makers and the larger media fraternity to acknowledge the effect of media beyond entertainment.

INTRODUCTION

Street harassment is one of the most pervasive forms of sexual harassment, yet persistently minimised. Street harassment refers to "unwanted behaviours from strangers that typically occur in public spaces (e.g., in the street or on public transportation)" (Davidson et al., 2015, 2016, p. 553). It constitutes a broad range of behaviours, and the boundaries of what counts as street harassment is varied and a little blurred. The general approach taken by researchers is to see street harassment as a form of sexual harassment that strangers overwhelmingly perpetrate in a public space. However, there are different definitions and lists given by researchers and policy-makers as to what constitutes street harassment. Davidson et al. list the following as examples of these behaviours: whistling, leering, slurs that are sexist, homophobic, or transphobic; asking someone for their name or number repeatedly after they have declined; calling them by sexual names; remarks; and demands. Bowman (1993, p. 523) defines stranger harassment as "both verbal and nonverbal behaviour, such as wolf-whistles, leers, winks, grabs, pinches, catcalls, and stranger remarks; the remarks are frequently sexual in nature and comment evaluatively on a woman's physical appearance or her presence in public."

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Street Harassment – A qualitative inquiry

Stranger harassment, eve teasing, and street harassment are different terms used to explain the misconduct of some men against women in public places (Herrera & McCarthy, 2023). "Eve-teasing", a generalised expression within the South Asian language, is used to define a type of sexual harassment that takes place on many streets and is widespread in countries like Bangladesh (Mowly & Bahfen, 2020; Ahmad & Mollik, 2015) and India (Talboys et al., 2017; Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014). It refers to the trivialization of the consequences of harassment, proposing an idea of a harmless and playful treatment situation that is offensive to the victims. This term reflects a somewhat euphemistic approach to describing the behaviour, which might downplay its severity compared to terms used in the West. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (2018) a case of stalking was recorded every 55 minutes in the country. However, this is not a problem in one single country; various surveys and studies show that it is prevalent around the world, be it the US, Canada, or Australia (Gunturu et al., 2015; Joseph, 2016). A survey conducted in around 40 countries among thirty thousand women (approx.) by Thomson Reuters Foundation (2018) found that younger females aged 18-34 were most subjected to sexual harassment; India was one of the leading countries.

The consequences of street harassment are profound. Research has consistently shown that it leads to intense fear and an activated fight or flight mode in the public and limits women's mobility. Ahmed et al. (2020), using a quantitative approach in their study, explain the profound effects of street harassment on women, including psychological distress such as anxiety, fear, and low self-esteem. It leads to restrictions on women's mobility and freedom, forcing them to change their routines, dressing, etc. to avoid harassment (Betts et al., 2019). "These impacts not only affect mental health but also hinder women's participation in public life, leading to a broader societal issue of gender inequality. Narula et al. (2025) shed light in their systematic literature review in detail about the long-term and short-term psychological, physiological and socio-behavioural effects of street harassment.

The majority of women victims who report these instances are told to ignore it or take it lightly or that the men meant no harm. This trivialisation of this phenomenon is not accidental; it is the result of structurally produced cultural mechanisms. Among the most powerful of these are the popular media like

Hindi and regional cinema and songs. Movies and songs, be it regional or Bollywood, continue to script harassment, especially street harassment as romance or playfulness for years. Across decades of Hindi cinema, a pattern of romance is seen where a reluctant male protagonist pursues a not-so-interested female love interest through a range of behaviour (following her, making sexist comments, touching her without consent), which is shown as fun or flirtatious, but when seen through a critical lens, is nothing but street harassment. The song sequences add more to this script; item songs, chasing sequences and teasing duets have long been the staple for Hindi cinema, normalising the male gaze and celebrating physical commentary on women's bodies. The 1990's Hindi cinema routinely frames a lot of behaviours of street harassment as playful steps in courtship; heroes harassment is romanticised while the villain's is condemned, creating a hierarchy where harassment of "moderate" intensity is normalised (Rajkumar, 2024); these portrayals are cited as a major reason for high rates of street harassment in India (Jayakumar & Joseph, 2024).

The current literature mainly focuses on the content or textual analysis of the films rather than investigating how actual audiences, which in this context are women who have experienced street harassment, perceive, interpret and engage with this media. This study helps us examine the perspectives of women victims of street harassment on how popular media affects the overall phenomenon of street harassment. This methodological difference shifts the research gaze from the content to human experience and positions the voices of harassed women at the centre.

Objective

The study aims to explore how women victims of street harassment in India perceive the role of the media and cinema in shaping this phenomenon.

Research question – How do women perceive the act of street harassment shown in the Indian media?

METHOD

Given the interpretative and socially situated nature of the research problem, this study employed a qualitative design with in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore participants' opinions on the topic with Braun and Clark's Reflexive thematic analysis (2006, 2019) as the methodological and analytic framework. A constructionist qualitative approach was considered the most epistemologically appropriate

because it helps us understand complex social phenomena and provides rich, contextualised insights (Creswell, 2009). This study is part of a broader doctoral research project. The present paper focuses on one of the sub-themes that emerged from the qualitative data analysis process.

Participants

A total of 22 women (18-32 years) who self-identified as having experienced street harassment at least once in the last year participated in the study. The women's educational backgrounds ranged from undergraduate to postgraduate levels, and some were even doctoral students. The purposive sampling strategy was used (Palinkas et al., 2015), because the study sought in-depth information and theoretical insight rather than statistical representativeness. Participants were recruited in various ways, including social media, university campus groups, and field visits.

Participants who indicated significant current psychological stress were informed about various psychological services, and wherever they expressed a preference, were not required to continue. The principle of thematic data saturation determined this final sample size.

An interview guide was developed by both researchers, informed by the extant literature on street harassment. The guide included a set of open-ended questions and probes around several thematic domains. The guide was considered a flexible framework rather than a fixed script. Written consent was taken, and rapport was formed. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes to 2 hours and were conducted in Hindi or English, depending on the participant's preference. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed.

Data Analysis

The transcribed data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis by Braun & Clarke (2006, 2019). It was selected because of its theoretically flexible and compatible nature. The six phases of the data analysis were conducted, which included familiarisation with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes back and forth, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Analysis was supported using manual coding in Excel.

RESULTS

Data analysis resulted in one overarching theme: "Media as a script for entitlement and vulgarity"; which explains how popular media acts as a script or guide for society that codes street harassment as romance, heroism and female flattery, thereby invalidating women's loved experiences and opinions; under this, we had three major subthemes –

Subtheme 1 - Romanticising the harassment: This theme talks about how popular media has created street harassment as masculine and hero-like; it has created stalking as a process of courtship.

A 30-year-old woman said, "dikhana galat nahi hai.. But ye mat dikhao ki who sahi hai yaa usko ladki enjoy kar rahi hai.." (it is not wrong to show these things... but don't show it in a good light as if the girl is enjoying it..). Referring to the lens through which movies show harassment in a positive and flirtatious way.

Another 26-year-old commented, "unko lagta hai ki herogiri hai ye sab..." (They feel like all this makes them look like a hero). Explaining how men believe that this makes them a hero in real life and they look cool engaging in all this behaviour.

Subtheme 2 - Media as a socialising agent: This theme talks about how media affects individual's values, attitudes and behaviour from childhood to adulthood. A 24-year-old woman shared "jaha se mai aati huu Bihar ya aitne saal UP rahi huu...yaha ke jo Bhojpuri gaane hote hai... toh jo chota 6 saal ka bacha...hai woh ye sab sun raha hai.." (Where I come from, Bihar, or having lived in UP for so many years... the Bhojpuri songs that are here... so the small 6-year-old child is listening to all this...) explaining about the prevalence and reach of vulgar songs on children.

A 25-year-old said "bachhe na obsessed ho jaata hai kisi movie se yaa songs se...Woh log kya consume kar rahe hai... yaa kya dekh rahe haia aspaas..." (Kids become obsessed with some movie and songs...what are those people consuming... or what are they seeing around them...); explaining how kids become obsessed with some lyrics of the songs or movies that they start copying that behavior.

Another 24-year-old woman shared that "There are movies that show such wrong things... And people consume it.. and we have to understand that these are massy movies"; explaining that popular media reaches a very large audience and has a huge effect on them.

Subtheme 3 - Manufacturing female consent: This theme talks about how popular media reframes aggressive pursuits as romantic persistence, and how

women's reaction to this behaviour is shown in these media; normalising and trivialising street harassment.

A 24-year-old woman said “ye movie mai dikhate hai naa ki ladki ke peeche 10 din pado who maan jaegi...” (“They show this in movies, right, that if you chase/pursue a girl for 10 days she will agree/give in...”); “it’s not good... For women... They are very bad...”; explaining how women's reaction to street harassment in the media is shown in the wrong contexts and women are shown accepting these behaviours as part of flirtatious teasing or something that they enjoy.

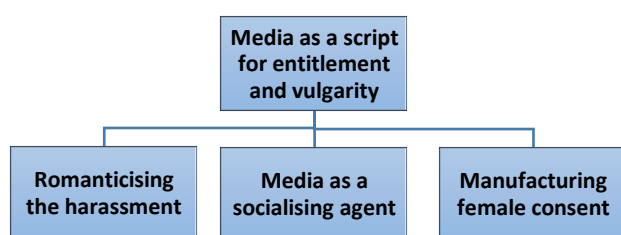


Figure 1. The overarching theme and Sub-themes

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the role of popular media in street harassment among women victims and their understanding of the phenomenon. A study conducted in Hyderabad with the sample size of 8264 women found out that over 30% of the sample experienced street harassment in the last month showcasing the vast prevalence of this phenomenon (Amaral et al., 2023). This study is motivated by the recognition of the role the media play in weaving a cultural ecology. The researchers have taken a qualitative approach by placing the voices of women who have not only experienced harassment but have also grown up immersed in a media environment. Interviews were transcribed, and thematic analysis was conducted on the data. The analysis resulted in an overarching theme – “Media as a script for entitlement and vulgarity” under which three subthemes emerged. Researchers want to highlight that these themes were not initially prompted by the theme in the interviews; they surfaced organically, telling us how important the role of media is for the women victims of street harassment and their understanding of it.

The first subtheme, “Romanticisation of harassment”, talks about the normalisation and trivialisation of street harassment behaviour as flirtatious and a part of courtship. This theme resonates with the feminist literature that says “no means yes” myth, which gives the idea to men that women’s

refusal is just a barrier they need to overcome. The term “herogiri” used by the participant is important to note, as the participant is identifying the process of role adaptation that men engage in where they believe themselves to be the protagonist and the women they are harassing as a love interest who will eventually be won.

The second subtheme – Media as a socialising agent explains how popular media play a very important role in the early socialisation of individuals and in their meaning-making about acceptable behaviours in society. A small teenage boy watching media which sexually objectifies women and normalises harassment is getting prone to a particular understanding of gender relations and moral behaviour before he or she has the cognitive and social resources to critically evaluate or resist that behaviour. The media environment is not something one switches on and off; it is present everywhere in our surroundings, whether we choose it or not, for example, the Bhojpuri songs that one of the participants mentioned are played during commute or at functions or even in shops. This sub-theme aligns with Simon & Gagnon's script theory (1986), which states that human behaviour, especially sexual, is not completely innate or biological but also a socially constructed phenomenon. The script we get to behave in a particular way in a society is not an explicit instruction guide but a gradual absorption of culturally available narratives. Bandura's Social learning theory (1977) can also be used here to explain how the consumption of this media leads to imitation of it; when someone sees their role model engaging in a set of behaviour and getting appraised for it, they believe it to be a script that needs to be followed to get the same anticipated outcome.

Participants acknowledge that street harassment is part of our social fabric, and it is not possible to stop showcasing it in the media, but the lens through which it is being showcased is something that can be controlled. Our third theme, “Manufactured female consent”, sheds light on this; these behaviours can be shown in the light where they are not endorsed and the victim is not shown secretly enjoying it. The consequences of this manufactured consent are extremely bad for women because when the media shows that women liked being stalked or whistled at, it creates a misconception that the man was right to keep persisting and justifies his behaviour.

Liz Kelly (1987), in her seminal work on the continuum of sexual violence, explains that different types of sexual violence are not some discrete

behaviours but lie on the same spectrum. Her work explains how behaviours that lie on the lower level of the spectrum, like street harassment, are brushed off, leading to more extreme acts like rape or acid attack that lie on the other side of the spectrum (Kelly, 1987). Popular media has a central role in normalising the acts of street harassment to an extent where no one tries to report such acts or take them seriously; it even delegitimises the victim's experience. It legitimises harassers, increases victim tolerance and discourages bystander intervention. Qualitative research conducted in 2019 elaborates on the portrayal of sexual aggression in Hindi cinema and explains how the media blurs the line in showcasing romance and harassment, presenting the aggression of the male perpetrator as charming and appealing and at the same time, female resistance as coyness, advertising the whole idea of male gaze (Gupta & Kumari, 2019). A study published by Oxfam studied the movies from 2012 to 2016, their portrayal of gender roles and behaviours, and how it affects violence against women and creates normalisation towards acts of street harassment. The study also reported that these films have an impact on women's sense of self and sexuality (Ghosh et al., 2018). The results of this study have significant implications for policy and practice in the coming years. There is a need for an inbuilt sense of responsibility and accountability across the whole fraternity of popular media to reflect on how some songs or scenes in a movie are depicted and what their long-term consequences are. The study, like all empirical research, has some limitations; the sample size of the study is not a complete representation of the population. Purposive sampling was conducted, which might lead to a sample with higher-than-average awareness and critical engagement. Future research can help us in understanding the role of media more clearly by including the narratives of men. A longitudinal media analysis can be conducted to understand the evolution of content with respect to time and changing policies.

CONCLUSION

The study sheds light on how public spaces have become a gendered domain where male harassment is normalised and female presence is conditioned. Popular media is a central pillar of that infrastructure. Reforming it through regulation, media literacy education, and the active support of counter-narratives is not a peripheral concern but a

prerequisite for any serious commitment to women's safety and equality in public space.

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