

CHAPTER 2

Tracing the genealogy of the hook-up culture in India through popular culture

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ABSTRACT

The prevalence of the contemporary hook-up culture has psychosocial implications. Uncommitted sexual behaviour has infiltrated the lives of young adults. Dating platforms like Tinder facilitate this phenomenon and offer an alternative to traditional romantic relationships. Westernization has extended as well as intensified this cultural revolution in India. One of the many reasons why hook-ups are fast gaining popularity in the country's urban population is the influence of American sitcoms. Television shows often project uncommitted relationships as inevitable interludes in any teenager's life. The endorsement of association between hook-ups and social approval escalates anxiety and insecurity among young adults. Many adolescents' consent to sexual relationships despite their disinclination. Constant emphasis on romance in Indian serialized shows and romanticisation of hook-ups work in a similar fashion to influence minds. Delhi's diverse popular culture has thus developed various perceptions to a hook-up. This paper attempts to examine several causative factors that have influenced the perception of the urban youth in Delhi toward their understanding of the hook-up culture, and to analyze the impacts of this cultural phenomenon on social lifestyle and mental health.

Keywords: Hook-up Culture, Young Adults, Social Media, Westernization, Mental Health

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INTRODUCTION

The paper aims to study the hitherto niche bracket of the hook-up culture in India to serve a few purposes simultaneously. One, the endeavour focusses on analysing various causative factors of the contemporary hook-up culture to address the socio-cultural revolution spreading across India. The effect of westernisation in the Indian framework is one of the major factors to propel the hook-up culture forward, especially in the urban domain. Deliberations on the impact of American sitcoms and Indian televised shows are followed by a study on Tinder's growing popularity in the country. The crystallisation of the impact on the social setup of the country and the mental health of those who participate in hook-ups culminate toward the end. The paper is thus an attempt to examine the frontiers of the hook-up culture majorly within the urban socio-cultural framework.

OBJECTIVE

To analyse the causative factors of the hook-up culture in India through popular culture, and to study its impact on social lifestyle and mental health of young adults.

METHODOLOGY

The present research paper is the culmination of collection and examination of data from various secondary sources namely books, magazines, websites, journals, etc. The analysis of the collected data was done by employing analytical method of research.

THE IMPACT OF WESTERNISATION AND AMERICAN SITCOMS

The notion of a unified "American culture" is a hoax. The United States of America is influenced by a multicultural ethos due to the intermingling of cultures from different regions of the world following the advances in technology and transportation. This essentially reinforces the supposition that what might be acceptable in one section of the country might not be approved in another: casual sexual behaviour is not approbated in every nook and corner of The United States of America as one is made to believe. This difference is either ignored or neglected by the masses. The aforementioned scenario becomes problematic since people belonging to other cultures follow the "American culture" without understanding that the concept looms like a mirage in reality. What American sitcoms illustrate is thus not a universal understanding, but a truth prevalent in restricted localities. The impact of American sitcoms bypasses the accuracy of their representation, thereby promoting false stereotypes amongst people. It is striking how people are getting impacted by a

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culture that does not exist. Many American sitcoms effectively nurse stereotypes that disfavour women. It is unsettling to see the perpetration of gender bias and violence in the name of conformity. This is generally done by including a loveable male character that will be ‘popular’ enough to overshadow the carefully enmeshed stereotypes of the plot and of his own characterisation.

Barney Stinson, for instance, is a similar character in *How I Met Your Mother*, popular for his womanising techniques. His oeuvre lies in regularly manipulating women in bars and other places for casual sexual experiences. His book titled, *The Playbook*, records many such successful attempts to hoodwink women purely for sexual pleasure. His dexterity in card manipulation is probably constructed to draw a parallel with his aforementioned manipulative techniques. The fact that such a character is considered what the modern reader would identify as “cool” lends support to the notion of proportionality between the hook-up culture and social approval amongst teenagers. This wrongly colours the perceptions of the people, and generalises several toxic phenomena on the pretext of ‘popularity.’ Though there exist manifold layers to Stinson’s characterisation, his contribution to normalise the exploitation of women and project them as gullible individuals cannot be ignored.

Another character similar to Stinson’s is that of Joey Tribbiani in *Friends*. Tribbiani is a dimwitted character who promiscuousness lands him up with multiple partners for sexual exploration and gratification. His hunger for food and sex remains constant throughout all seasons of the show. His outlandish behaviour due to his gullibility is compensated for by his sexual prowess. Can Tribbiani maintain his popularity after the subtraction of his predatory behaviour? Probably not. Stinson and Tribbiani offer several avenues to the plot of their respective sitcoms to commodify women and get away with it. Further, when Tribbiani’s childhood sexual abuse from his tailor becomes apparent to him and his friends, it is used as another punchline. Neil D. Brick points out the effect of childhood sexual abuse on interpersonal relationships. In “The One With The Videotape,” Tribbiani’s comment on Ross’ filming of his sexual encounter with Rachel without her consent implies his admittance of having filmed his own sexual encounter with someone without taking prior consent.

Pamela Anderson’s character in *Home Improvement* is instrumental in perpetuating the idea that beautiful women function only to serve the male gaze. The same idea is reinforced by the

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characterisation of women who indulge in one-night stands with Barney Stintson in *How I Met Your Mother*. Physically and sexually appealing women are represented in a manner to identify visual beauty with intellectual inferiority, leading to the false presumption that beautiful women cannot be professionally motivated. It also brings the question of ‘beauty’ into question since only a certain division of women is apparently considered ‘beautiful’. Moreover, the association of external beauty with social approval and legitimate feminine ideals is disturbing since it endorses a narrow perspective and puts social pressure on women.

Glorification of sex and the hook-up culture is majorly caused by an increase in sexual content on the television. The current insistence on the hook-up culture perpetuates toxic masculinity among other things. Moreover, the American society is more sexually permissive than the Indian society. The dynamics of desire function differently in these regions. The effect of American sitcoms on Indian teenagers can therefore be exponentially high due lack of proper sex education in the country. Their willingness to explore physical relationships can result in early pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases unless preventive measures are taken.

POSITIONING TINDER IN THE SOCIO-CULTURAL SETTING OF INDIA

Global Web Index states that 54% single women and 30% married women are on Tinder. This indicates their inclination to consider the dating culture and the hook-up culture. The presence of women from urban (76%), suburban (17%), and rural (7%) domains highlights the involvement of a heterogenous group. The young population seems to be fascinated with Tinder: about 45% women fall in the age group of 25-34, and 38% in 16-24. While Tinder is evidently appealing to most women, there exists a possibility that some women have their accounts on online dating platforms because of social pressure.

Platforms like Tinder encourage women to choose men in contrast to the culture of arranged marriages in the country. People in India highly prioritise parental consent and religious ceremonies in marriages. While the debate concerning arranged marriages is quite complex, their effect on inhibiting women’s sexual freedom cannot be ignored. The institution of marriage is used as a license by men to gratify themselves sexually without their partner’s consent. Society’s authorisation of marital rape by discarding it as a ‘private’ matter constricts women’s preferences and, more importantly, their consent. The wife is reduced to a commodity who must give in to the

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demands of a male dominated society. The violence under the surface of marriage, a seemingly stable institution, gets overshadowed under the garb of codifying the societal norms.

Exposure to the western culture has resulted in the partial breakdown of Indian traditions. The formality linked with the conduction of arranged marriages has somewhat reduced. The introduction of the hook-up culture can be attributed as one of the reasons why sex out of wedlock is becoming increasingly common. The fact that the society deprives them of the opportunity to make informed choices for their future makes the hook-up culture more appealing.

One of the studies conducted by Tinder shows that 70% of the women between 18-35 valued a partner who respected them and their lifestyle choices the most. Since the narrative of respect has often been compromised in case of women, their preference for respect sets up the tone for future relationships. Many users, however, have complained that Tinder has largely transmogrified into platform for hooking up. Since hook-ups eliminate emotional attachment and constitute of a purely sexual relationship, women's preference for respectful men in the given context loses majority of its meaning.

The clash between the traditional Indian culture and the contemporary hook-up culture is inevitable. Even though Tinder provides young lovers a certain sense of freedom, it is important to note that it is not suitable when one desires a meaningful relationship. Typical Indian families desire long-lasting commitment with a suitable partner for perpetuation of their family name. Arranged marriages in India work as a transaction between two families who trade people because of the possession of certain qualities that they deem fit for a blissful marriage. The dialogue between families testifies to this transaction. Indian families thus regard the hook-up culture as a toxic distraction from the ultimate goal of marriage. The emphasis on virginity before marriage is another reason why the hook-up culture acts as a threat. It is unclear whether this generational gap in understanding will be resolved in the upcoming years or not.

HOOK-UP CULTURE AND THE INDIAN TELEVISION

A cursory glance on Indian serialised shows on the television is sufficient to provide a glimpse into the minds of innately sexist characters. Patriarchal norms are embedded in the mindset of the masses, and rarely undergo a change with the continuation of the show. More striking is the focus on romance in almost every possible genre. Distortion of factual data in a non-fictional show for

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projecting a romantic relationship is frequent. Popular Bollywood songs are often included in the background whenever lovers interact with each other.

Manipulation of historical data for entertainment purposes is a recognised shortcoming of televised shows based on history. The Indian television, however, misuses its freedom for greater number of views and ratings. *Chandra Nandini*, for instance, is based on the life of Chandragupta Maurya. Nandini, the chief queen and the love interest of the king, is, however, a fictional character. This is problematic since the entire show revolves around their love story. By constructing the plot around a fictional character, the show fails to provide historical insight to the viewers. Moreover, the fact that a love story becomes the focal point of the show supports the fact that the Indian television glorifies romance and intimacy.

Though the hook-up culture is not explicitly depicted because of its conflict with traditional Indian values, it is indirectly promoted by the glorification of romance. In fact, inclusion of Bollywood's item songs in specific scenes reinforces objectification of women. Male entitlement, incessant stalking, and the usage of sexual vocabulary are often endorsed through the medium of television. For instance, the makers of the show *Naagin* have used sexual innuendos in the dialogues of the protagonists. Romance finds its way even in *Ballika Vadhu*, a show which was concerned about highlighting social predicaments, especially in the rural domain.

B.R. Chopra's serialised adaptation of the Mahabharata story fails to mention Draupadi's menstruation at the time of her humiliation at Hastinapur. This reveals something of "the schizoid terror that the female body wrecks on the fragile bourgeois sensibility." Indian television reflects as well as promotes this mindset. Though it projects traditional values of the society, Indian television is quite similar to what the Indian audience perceive of the hook-up culture. It is therefore ironic how hook-ups are criticised while television is widely used for personal 'entertainment.'

CHANGES IN SOCIAL LIFESTYLE AND IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH

It is interesting to note that people often get entangled in the web of meaningless chatter and small talk while dating. Internet becomes a medium to conceal dark personalities under edited pictures and fake bios. Not only does this waste the time of a user in pursuit of a potential partner for dating, but also poses major threat to the user's security.

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It cannot be ignored that the hook-up culture is essentially based on mutual attraction between individuals. This advances certain notions of beauty which are often racist. Several men on Tinder have complained that women are more likely to right-swipe men with white skin. Evaluating people on the basis of their visual appeal for sexual encounters can rarely be done without subjecting the other person to racist bias. Entrenched societal bias can aggravate in the upcoming generations if the trend of hook-up culture continues. This will not only support perceptions which counter humanistic approaches, but also increase anxiety amongst teenagers and adults regarding their “beauty.”

Many scholars argue that the usage of Tinder for hooking up can be convenient for highly ambitious people whose professional demands prevent them from venturing out into the dating world to meet new people for personal and emotional fulfilment. It is, however, essential to consider the psychological impacts of hooking up for sexual gratification for people with hectic lifestyles. A surprisingly high percentage of people have reported feeling exploited after hooking up with someone. Casual sexual behaviour in a relationship can also become a channel for avoiding difficult questions about the relationship.

Since more than half of the hook-ups are followed by the consumption of alcohol and drugs, it is common for individuals to end up regretting the entire expedition. Psychological trauma can have long term impact on one’s mental health and interpersonal relationships. Another major disadvantage is the moral judgement, ostracism and gossip that one has to deal with. The emphasis on chastity in the Indian multicultural setup is immense. Young girls in various regions of Bhopal, for instance, are unable to find suitors since people presume that they are victims of Bhopal Gas Tragedy, and have been afflicted with its side effects. Girls who establish sexual relations out of wedlock similarly find it difficult to marry a suitable partner.

A study has shown that individuals with depression might engage in sexting, though the reason remains obfuscated. It has been suggested that depressive mood hinders one’s decision-making capability. Van Ouytsel reported that adolescents with higher levels of depression are significantly more likely to engage in sexting than those with lower levels of depression. Adolescent sexters are more likely to report negative health issues. This presents a cause-and-effect relationship between individuals exhibiting sexting behaviour and health predicaments.

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Tinder can prove to be a malicious platform, and can impair one's security. Several hackers have complained that Tinder has been used for blackmailing people by unprecedentedly clicking pictures through the camera. Hackers can charge people huge sums of money in exchange for maintaining their privacy. Also, an individual's account can be discovered in social media platforms like Facebook. This exemplifies how Tinder fails to protect its users from the aforementioned threats to their privacy and security.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of the hook-up culture in the urban sphere of India is a complex phenomenon. The Indian society is not sexually permissive; youngsters in India are thus likely to remain strangled under societal norms and conventions. The pathological anxiety because of this dogma combined with the pathological discontent from the social reality can culminate into humongous baggage for any individual. Moreover, besides taking into account the hedonism of individual choices, the onus of actions and the consequences of those actions needs to be factored in, too. It is time that the society takes responsibility for the propagation of foreign cultural practices in the country.

Various causative factors that drive the hook-up culture in India have been elucidated within the ambit of this paper. The advantages and drawbacks of one's participation on Tinder underline the background impact of this new revolution. Parental opinion on rise of the hook-up culture is as expected: most Indian parents do not approve of it. The gap in this understanding brews more anxiety and pressure, and can negatively impact one's mental health. Social understanding has been framed on the basis of surface information. Ingrained traditional values are anyway inhibitory to the practice of engaging in hook-ups. Mental health of the individuals is another major concern. The current overall analysis of the hook-up culture in India can be performed only through fragmented mirrors since the entire reality of coital relations is considered as a taboo in the country.

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