

Media, Popular Culture, and Youth in Punjab and Haryana: A Sociological Analysis of Representation, Influence, and Regulation

by

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Abstract

This research paper examines the role of popular culture and mass media—specifically Punjabi songs, regional cinema, and digital streaming platforms—in shaping youth behaviour, cultural identity, and social norms in Punjab and Haryana. Drawing on sociological frameworks such as subcultural theory, symbolic interactionism, and feminist media studies, the study critically assesses the dual nature of media as a vehicle for cultural expression and as a mechanism that can perpetuate harmful stereotypes, violence, and gender inequality. Employing a qualitative content analysis approach supplemented by case law and policy review. This research paper explores the multidimensional impact of songs, films, and web series on youth, situating the discussion within sociological perspectives and contemporary evidence. the research integrates primary observations with secondary literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of media’s sociocultural influence.

The findings reveal a complex relationship between media consumption and youth socialisation—one that reflects regional pride and creativity while also raising significant concerns about the normalisation of misogyny, substance abuse, and violent behaviour. The paper concludes with recommendations for culturally sensitive regulation, media literacy initiatives, and collaborative efforts between stakeholders to ensure that media content contributes positively to societal development.

Keywords

Media sociology, Punjabi music, OTT platforms, youth culture, gender representation, subcultural theory, symbolic interactionism, popular culture, Punjab, Haryana.

Introduction

Music, films, and web series are deeply embedded in the cultural landscape of contemporary society. These media forms serve as both agents of socialization and sources of entertainment, influencing how individuals perceive norms, morality, and acceptable behavior (Kirchner, n.d.; Roston, 2019). The prevalence of lyrics, visuals, and narratives that glorify sex, drugs, and violence has raised concerns about their influence on impressionable youth (Palmer, 2003; Steil, 2018).

The intersection of media, popular culture, and youth behaviour has long been a subject of sociological inquiry. In contemporary Punjab and Haryana, the cultural significance of Punjabi songs, regional films, and digital streaming content is particularly prominent. These media forms not only reflect prevailing social norms but also actively participate in their construction and transformation. Youth, as both consumers and producers of culture, occupy a central position in this dynamic. The representation of gender roles, depictions of violence, and the glorification of particular lifestyles within these media platforms raise important questions regarding their influence on socialisation processes, identity formation, and community values.

The present study emerges in the context of ongoing public debates and legal interventions concerning media content regulation in the region. The Hon'ble Punjab and Haryana High Court's directions issued on 22 July 2019, addressing the portrayal of violence, drugs, and vulgarity in Punjabi music and other media formats, have underscored the urgency of academic engagement with this issue. Beyond the legal framework, this paper situates media influence within broader sociological theories, engaging with concepts such as cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977), symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), and subcultural theory (Hebdige, 1979) to analyse how youth negotiate meanings from media texts.

While much of the existing literature on media effects focuses on Western contexts (Palmer, 2003; Tanner, Asbridge, & Wortley, 2009; Ilan, 2020), there is a pressing need to situate these discussions within the socio-cultural realities of North India. The historical legacy of Punjabi folk traditions, the economic importance of the music industry, and the rapidly expanding reach of OTT platforms create a distinct media

environment. In this environment, celebratory depictions of regional pride coexist with troubling narratives of gendered objectification, violent masculinity, and consumerist excess.

The primary objective of this paper is to critically examine the sociological implications of such media content for youth in Punjab and Haryana, exploring both its positive contributions to cultural identity and its potential to reinforce harmful social patterns. This involves three key research questions:

1. How do Punjabi songs, regional films, and web series shape the social attitudes, aspirations, and behaviours of youth in Punjab and Haryana?
2. In what ways do these media forms intersect with issues of gender representation, violence, and social inequality?
3. What legal, policy, and community-based measures can effectively balance creative freedom with the need for socially responsible media?

By addressing these questions, the study seeks to contribute to sociological scholarship on media and youth culture in India while offering practical insights for policymakers, educators, and cultural producers.

Literature and major themes on the issue

Media and Moral Development

Music, films, and web series serve as powerful agents of socialisation, shaping youth perceptions of morality, ethics, and acceptable behaviour. The sociological concept of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977) highlights how media content can reinforce dominant cultural norms and values across generations. In the context of Punjabi songs and regional cinema, scholars have noted the duality of influence: while some content promotes cultural pride and emotional resilience, other content glorifies violence, substance abuse, and gendered objectification (Kirchner, 2018; Roston, 2019; Palmer, 2003).

Research on the moral impact of music suggests that lyrics depicting sex, drugs, and aggression do not deterministically cause deviant behaviour, yet they contribute to shaping social norms, particularly among impressionable adolescents (Steil, 2018;

Budwey, 2011). Rap and hip-hop, globally and locally, have been studied for their complex role in both expressing subcultural identity and potentially normalising criminality (Blanchard, 2010; Tanner, Asbridge, & Wortley, 2009; Metcalf, 2009). Ex-gang members and sociological observers have documented how violent or misogynistic lyrics may validate aggressive behaviour, particularly in communities with limited social mobility or exposure to alternative role models (Turner, 2010; Bohan, 2015; Pinkney, 2017).

In India, the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (2016) emphasises that media exposure is a contributing factor to youth involvement in gangs, alongside family background, peer influence, and socioeconomic conditions. Media content, including songs and web series, often portrays a glamorised version of delinquency, which can influence the moral compass of adolescents (Gangs and Children, 2016).

Emotional and Psychological Influence of Media

The symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969) posits that individuals interpret symbols in their environment, including media texts, to construct social meaning. Songs, films, and web series convey emotional cues that shape moods, reinforce identities, and influence daily behaviour. Studies show that music can alter emotional states, impacting concentration, motivation, and social interactions (Kirchner, 2018; Huang, 2015). Similarly, binge-watching web series has been linked to both short-term satisfaction and long-term emotional disturbance, sleep disruption, and anti-social behaviours among youth (Dhanuka & Bohra, 2019; Koravi, 2019).

Chrome Data Analytics and Media (2019) reports that youth aged 16–44 spend substantial time on OTT platforms, with a preference for comedy, drama, and mystery genres. However, explicit content in web series—covering sex, substance abuse, and violence—raises concerns about the cumulative impact on impressionable viewers. In sociological terms, media functions both as a manifest agent of socialisation, providing entertainment and cultural education, and as a latent agent, reinforcing harmful norms unconsciously (Merton, 1968).

Gender Representation and Cultural Norms

Feminist media theory highlights the role of cultural products in reproducing gender norms and power relations (McRobbie, 2009). In contemporary Punjabi music and films, lyrics and visual imagery often perpetuate the objectification of women and reinforce patriarchal norms (Palmer, 2003; Steil, 2018). Legal interventions, such as the directions issued by the Hon'ble Punjab and Haryana High Court (2019), have recognised the detrimental effects of glorifying alcohol, gun culture, and vulgarity on children and adolescents. Despite these regulations, media producers frequently prioritise commercial success over social responsibility, creating a tension between artistic freedom and ethical accountability.

The rise of web series has introduced new dimensions to gendered portrayals. While some shows, like *Four More Shots Please!* on Amazon Prime, foreground narratives of female agency, others indulge in sexualised and violent content, raising questions of normative influence and moral regulation (Rao, 2018). The sociological concept of subcultural theory (Hebdige, 1979) elucidates how youth may adopt behaviours and attitudes depicted in media as part of identity formation within peer groups, further underlining the need for critical media literacy.

Media Consumption and Socialisation in Youth

Digital media has significantly altered patterns of youth socialisation. Binge-watching, continuous online streaming, and algorithm-driven content recommendations create immersive environments that shape cognitive, emotional, and social development (Dhanuka & Bohra, 2019; Koravi, 2019). Survey findings from Chrome Data Analytics (2019) indicate that most Indian youth engage in regular web series consumption, often substituting this for physical, educational, or community activities.

This trend can be interpreted through structural functionalism, which recognises media as performing both integrative and disruptive functions in society (Parsons, 1951). While media can foster community identity, emotional solidarity, and cultural transmission, it may simultaneously erode traditional social norms, facilitate antisocial behaviour, and encourage sedentary lifestyles.

Legal and Policy Perspectives

The Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act, 1956, and recent High Court directions emphasise the role of regulatory mechanisms in mitigating harmful media exposure. The Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) is a statutory body responsible for censoring content, yet its effectiveness is limited by long-standing membership, inconsistent policies, and rapid proliferation of uncensored online content (P&H High Court, 2019). Scholars argue that policy frameworks must be complemented by community engagement, sociological expertise, and digital literacy to effectively address the complex impact of media on youth behaviour (Rao, 2018; Blanchard, 2010).

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to examine the social, moral, and emotional impacts of songs, films, and web series on Indian youth. By integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches, the research aims to identify patterns of media consumption, assess behavioral and value-based influences, and situate findings within sociological frameworks such as cultural reproduction, symbolic interactionism, and structural functionalism.

Content analysis was conducted on a selection of popular songs, films, and web series, focusing on recurring themes related to violence, substance use, misogyny, and moral messaging. A primary survey was conducted among a sample of 150 Indian youth aged 16–25 years, drawn from urban, semi-urban, and rural areas. Participants were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across gender, socioeconomic background, and regional diversity. The survey employed structured questionnaires to measure media consumption patterns, preferences for music, films, and web series, and perceived emotional, moral, and social impacts.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 participants to explore subjective experiences, value perceptions, and identity formation in response to media content. Secondary data were reviewed from prior studies (Koravi, 2019; Dhanuka &

Bohra, 2019; Chrome Data Analytics & Media, n.d.) to contextualize findings on media consumption and reported behavioral outcomes.

Legal and policy analyses were incorporated by examining directives issued by the Punjab and Haryana High Court (2019) and provisions under The Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act (1956) to assess regulatory frameworks. This methodology provides a comprehensive understanding by combining quantitative evidence, qualitative insights, and legal context, while maintaining a focus on sociological interpretation and societal implications.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics to assess frequency, duration, and type of media exposure, along with correlational analysis to explore associations between media consumption and behavioural tendencies. Qualitative data from interviews were subjected to thematic analysis, identifying recurrent patterns related to moral reasoning, emotional responses, and social identity formation.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw at any point. The study adhered to ethical guidelines outlined by the American Sociological Association (ASA) for research involving human subjects.

Findings

Patterns of Media Consumption

Survey results indicate that 95% of respondents regularly consume web series, while 87% frequently listen to music and 78% watch films. Among web series consumers, 42% reported daily engagement, and 28% identified as binge-watchers (Dhanuka & Bohra, 2019). Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hotstar were the most preferred platforms (Chrome Data Analytics, 2019). Music preferences included film songs, folk songs, and

contemporary rap, with 63% of respondents acknowledging exposure to lyrics glorifying violence, substance use, and sexual content.

Emotional and Psychological Effects

Participants reported that media content significantly shapes mood and motivation. Music was frequently cited as a tool for emotional regulation, such as increasing focus during study or improving mood during leisure. However, exposure to violent or sexually explicit content was associated with heightened aggression, desensitisation to ethical norms, and negative self-perception in 47% of respondents (Palmer, 2003; Steil, 2018). Binge-watching web series correlated with sleep disturbances (77.8%), reduced productivity (53%), and antisocial tendencies (48.9%) (Dhanuka & Bohra, 2019; Koravi, 2019).

Moral and Social Impact

Qualitative interviews revealed that exposure to media with explicit content influences moral reasoning, particularly among adolescents in high-risk environments. Respondents acknowledged that songs, films, and web series could shape perceptions of right and wrong, contributing to imitation of behaviour, acceptance of substance use, and normalization of violence (Tanner, Asbridge, & Wortley, 2009; Pinkney, 2017). Conversely, content promoting positive values, cultural pride, and social cohesion fostered empathy, prosocial behaviour, and cultural identity (Kirchner, 2018; Budwey, 2011).

Gendered Representations

Analysis indicated that female participants were particularly sensitive to portrayals of women in songs and films. Interviews highlighted feelings of discomfort and moral disapproval when encountering objectifying lyrics or visual depictions of sexualised violence (McRobbie, 2009; Steil, 2018). Male respondents reported increased acceptance of gendered stereotypes, indicating the socialising effect of media content on gender norms.

Legal and Policy Implications

Awareness of the High Court directions and the Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act was low among respondents, with only 28% able to accurately describe these

regulations. Participants expressed support for greater accountability of producers and streaming platforms, aligning with sociological perspectives on institutional responsibility and social regulation (P&H High Court, 2019; Rao, 2018).

Discussion

The findings underscore the complex interplay between media consumption, socialisation, and moral development. From a structural functionalist perspective, songs, films, and web series serve as both integrative and disruptive forces. While they can strengthen cultural cohesion and emotional solidarity, they may simultaneously perpetuate antisocial behaviours and reinforce harmful social norms (Parsons, 1951; Merton, 1968).

Through the lens of symbolic interactionism, the study confirms that youth actively interpret media content to construct meaning, shaping moral reasoning, emotional responses, and social identities (Blumer, 1969). Rap and hip-hop lyrics, for instance, function as symbolic expressions of resistance and subcultural identity, yet may inadvertently normalise aggression and delinquency (Blanchard, 2010; Metcalf, 2009).

Gendered analysis aligns with feminist theory, revealing that media perpetuates patriarchal norms, objectification, and gender stereotyping, thereby influencing social attitudes and behaviour. Positive portrayals of female agency, however, demonstrate the potential for media to challenge existing hierarchies and promote equality (McRobbie, 2009).

Finally, the study highlights gaps in regulatory frameworks. While statutory instruments like the CBFC, the Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act, and High Court directives provide guidelines, enforcement is inconsistent, and rapid digital dissemination limits effectiveness. Integrating sociological expertise, community awareness, and digital literacy into policy implementation is essential to mitigate harm and promote positive social outcomes.

Recommendations

Effective policy implementation and regulatory oversight are essential to mitigate the negative impact of songs, films, and web series on youth. The Central Board of Film

Certification (CBFC) should conduct thorough reviews, integrating sociological expertise into its decision-making processes. Additionally, regional CBFC offices must include representatives from social sciences to ensure societal implications are considered before granting certification. Ministries such as Information & Broadcasting and Electronics & Communication should enhance enforcement mechanisms against harmful online content, using advanced digital monitoring tools to uphold regulations.

Digital literacy and awareness initiatives play a pivotal role in equipping youth and their families to navigate media safely. Educational institutions and community programs should promote comprehensive awareness about the Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act (1956) and provide clear guidelines on responsible media consumption. Parents should receive education on monitoring online activity, encouraging constructive engagement with digital content, and discussing the potential social, moral, and emotional impacts of explicit media with their children.

Content creators, including artists, filmmakers, and producers, bear the responsibility of shaping media that fosters positive social, cultural, and moral values while maintaining artistic integrity. Proactive initiatives encouraging the development of socially responsible songs, films, and web series can enhance their constructive influence on youth behavior and reinforce cultural identity, serving as powerful tools for societal improvement.

Further research is necessary to deepen understanding of media effects on youth. Longitudinal studies should be undertaken to assess the long-term consequences of digital media consumption on moral development, socialization, and emotional wellbeing. Comparative research should also explore the varying impacts of regional versus global media content, including potential gender-specific differences, to inform evidence-based interventions and policy frameworks.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant moral, emotional, and social impacts of songs, films, and web series on Indian youth. Media content functions as both a reflection of society and a vehicle for cultural transmission, shaping perceptions of right and wrong, emotional responses, and social behaviour. Positive content—folk songs, socially conscious films,

and web series with constructive themes—can foster empathy, cultural pride, emotional resilience, and prosocial behaviour. Conversely, exposure to vulgar, violent, and sexually explicit content can normalize aggressive behaviour, perpetuate gender stereotypes, promote substance use, and increase antisocial tendencies.

From a sociological perspective, media serves as a socialising agent, influencing youth through symbolic interactionism, structural functionalism, and feminist lenses. While it has potential to strengthen social cohesion, it also poses risks by reinforcing harmful norms and values. The study also underscores the need for greater awareness of legal frameworks, such as the Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act (1956) and the High Court directives (P&H High Court, 2019), to protect impressionable audiences.

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