Anti-rape media campaigns: A transnational perspective

Sukhmani Khorana

University of Wollongong, skhorana@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

Anti-rape media campaigns: A transnational perspective

Abstract
This essay examines two cases of anti-rape media campaigns that originated in particular cultural contexts, but went viral online. The first of these is #ThisDoesntMeanYes campaign that began when four English women teamed up with renowned photographer Perou and hit the streets of London and snapped 200 women in their own clothing. The second is the It’s Your Fault video in which a group of Indian female comedians lampoon controversial comments by public figures after the gang rape of a student in New Delhi in 2012. Given the specificity of the socio-cultural contexts, as well as the impact of transnational new media tools, the above campaigns can be read as largely transgressive in the modes employed to critique rape culture and intersectional in their emphasis on diversity and solidarity.

Publication Details

This journal article is available at Research Online: https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers/3969
Anti-rape media campaigns: 
A transnational perspective

Sukhmani Khorana
University of Wollongong, Australia

Abstract
This essay examines two cases of anti-rape media campaigns that originated in particular cultural contexts, but went viral online. The first of these is #ThisDoesntMeanYes campaign that began when four English women teamed up with renowned photographer Perou and hit the streets of London and snapped 200 women in their own clothing. The second is the It's Your Fault video in which a group of Indian female comedians lampoon controversial comments by public figures after the gang rape of a student in New Delhi in 2012. Given the specificity of the socio-cultural contexts, as well as the impact of transnational new media tools, the above campaigns can be read as largely transgressive in the modes employed to critique rape culture and intersectional in their emphasis on diversity and solidarity.

Keywords
Digital media, feminism, intersectionality, online activism, rape culture

Introduction
During a short stint at a prestigious undergraduate college at Delhi University in 2002, I and a number of my peers were shocked to hear a public figure’s advice on how to avoid sexual harassment when taking public transport in the city. ‘Just dress like a boy’, she told us, unreflective of the misogynistic message she was sending to young urban women. Most of these women were aspiring to be mobile career people, unhindered by the dogmas and archaic gender dynamics of their parents’ and grandparents’ generations.

In April 2012, when visiting another prominent South Delhi institution, the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), for an international conference, I was struck with the high levels of campus activism and gender sensitivity in the postgraduate cohort. I also happened to be monitoring the nation’s numerous and culturally powerful English-language television news networks for my postdoctoral research project (funded by Professor Graeme Turner’s Australian Research Council Federation Fellowship). Again, I noticed a remarkable increase in the featuring of previously taboo gender-related issues (Khorana, 2013) on prime time news, as well as talk shows on political and social subjects.

To give a snapshot of the kinds of stories that were making headlines, these included the battering

Corresponding author:
Sukhmani Khorana, Building 25, Faculty of Law, Humanities and Arts, Northfields Avenue, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia.
Email: skhorana@uow.edu.au
of baby girls by their fathers in low-class and middle-class homes in big metropolitan cities, gang rapes of minor girls and reports on the failings of public schooling. In May of the same year, the Bollywood superstar with a difference, Aamir Khan, brought such issues more conspicuously into the public and media spotlight by starring in and producing a 13-part Oprah-style chat show called Satyamev Jayate (or, the truth always triumphs – see Star Plus, n.d.). The series had an overwhelmingly positive, class-transcending response, with the very first episode on the high prevalence of female foeticide dissuading hundreds from sex determination tests (sonography that is conducted to reveal the sex of the embryo). For instance, according to a report in the current affairs magazine India Today, the government of the western Indian state of Rajasthan announced stern measures against these tests soon after the Satyamev Jayate episode focusing on female foeticide in 2012 (see Parihar, 2013).

So what has changed in middle-class India and its media in terms of reporting on feminist activism in the last decade? And, does this reflect or leverage wider transnational patterns? If so, what does transnational feminist solidarity mean in the new post-global, post-Internet age?

Many detractors would err on the side of political correctness and argue that it is not even possible to talk about one India, let alone speak of this India as undergoing youthful, self-initiated, introspective social transformation. However, when I met Shoma Chaudhury, then managing editor of leading news magazine Tehelka at the Storyology conference (see Walkley Foundation, n.d.) in Sydney in July 2013, she too noted that the tenor of the recent anti-rape movement was markedly different from previous instances of orchestrated civil society protests (such as the anti-corruption movement in 2011). Another visiting Indian journalist, Manu Joseph, suggested that this was potentially due to a vast increase in the number of young women working in the Indian media.

So, while empowered female media professionals are taking the reins in terms of spotlighting gender issues, and young urban audiences are clamouring for a shift in media and societal values, the media in the west seems to be taking its time to adjust its orientalist framings of this now transitioning society. Most stories on major world news satellite networks reported on the anti-rape protests, and the recent conviction of the four accused with nuance and adequate contextual information. There were even those that rated the Delhi reportage and responses as more gender-progressive than the victim-blaming discourse of the Steubenville rape case around the same time by the major US news networks (Mackenzie, 2013). This is because in the reporting of the latter case, the US media focused its attention and sympathy on the perpetrators of the assault who happened to be high-school football players (Mackenzie, 2013). In the coverage of the Delhi rape case, on the other hand, the emphasis was on the country-wide vigils and demands for political and legal action (Burke, 2012).

However, some western media commentaries began to give the impression that India was not a safe place to visit for female tourists, and painted South Asian men with a rather broad, and a rather unflattering brushstroke. Noteworthy among these was the account of a University of Chicago exchange student who allegedly suffered constant sexual harassment and was diagnosed with a traumatic disorder on her return home (Sashin & Hawkins-Gaar, 2013). This was followed by the account of an African-American student on the same trip who had similar experiences, but added that she also met Indian men who were extremely kind and supportive (twoseat, 2013).

While giving a talk at a student feminist society at the University of Wollongong, I was asked how west-based feminists could support the movement in India. The answer lies not in telling people what to do, I replied, but in staying well-informed, looking past stereotypes and expressing solidarity:

After the talk, I wondered what solidarity looks like in a post-colonial, transnational era? How does it manifest in new mediated forms that are potentially progressive, yet also risk reinforcing the problems of old media? And, what makes a viral anti-rape campaign transgressive? This short essay will attempt to address these questions by examining two recent online anti-rape campaigns – #ThisDoesntMeanYes campaign that began when four English women teamed up with renowned photographer Perou, hit the streets of London and snapped 200 women in their own clothing (that is, wearing clothes of their choice, and not selected by stylists or designers); and the ‘It’s Your Fault’ video...
in which a group of Indian female comedians lam-
poon controversial comments by public figures after
the gang-rape of a student in New Delhi in 2012. I
will examine these campaigns within a broader con-
text of the global rise in the use of new media for
feminist activism. While it may appear that India and
the UK are not comparable milieus for studying anti-
rape campaigns, this essay is based on the premise
that transnational, intersectional feminism and its
mediated manifestations call for precisely such com-
parisons. In other words, it is imperative to both
understand and study rape as a global problem, and
responses to it (such as social media campaigns) as
conversations taking place across boundaries of
class, nation, region, religion, and ethnicity. This is
not to overlook the context-specificity of sexual
assaults, and the transnational disparities in political
and legal redress, but to highlight the importance of
local as well as global elements in devising success-
ful grassroots campaigns.

**Feminist activism and new media: a transnational perspective**

According to Kaitlynn Mendes (2015) in her book
on the history of the SlutWalk movement, the sig-
nificance of the movement lay not in the premise of
a protest against sexual violence per se but in its abil-
ity to capture the attention of the mainstream media
in a range of national contexts (p. 11). After recount-
ing sexual assault cases and subsequent protests that
emerged in Canada, the United States, the United
Kingdom, Australia, Singapore, New Zealand, South
Africa and India from 2011 to 2014, Mendes (2015)
concludes, ‘All of the above examples are evidence
that rape culture is not just a Western/Eastern, north-
ern/southern, first world/third world problem, but
one which is experienced, albeit in different ways,
around the globe’ (p. 9). In other words, what she
sets up at the start of the book is the need for an in-
depth examination of a movement that simultane-
ously transcends national borders and operates
across various media platforms.

Among the media platforms of significance that
led to the popularity of SlutWalk, and related feminist
movements in the last 5 years are blogs and social
media. According to Loney-Howes (2015), these
two kinds of media are primarily used to detail
women’s experiences and to obtain support, espe-
cially in the case of anti-rape politics (p. 4). Her
work also suggests that ‘For many of these women, the
use of social media to speak out about their experi-
ences of rape and sexual violence demonstrates the
limited scope of the law to recognise the
diversity of rape victims and prosecute perpetrators’
(Loney-Howes, 2015, p. 4). This sort of speaking
back is in turn theorised in terms of the emergence
of fluid counter-publics:

In the context of the online sphere, I contend that the
counter-publics discussed in this article have the
capacity to transcend and propagate counter-public, or
non-normative (feminist) political deliberations, into
the public sphere. This is facilitated by the fact that
these campaigns are publically accessible and are
created and/or supported by public institutions.
Therefore, I contend that these anti-rape campaigns are
fluid counter-publics. (Loney-Howes, 2015, p. 6)

In a similar vein, McLean and Maalsen (2013)
discuss the emergence of the online-based ‘Destroy
the Joint’ feminist movement in Australia as though
it were an alternative social space. They add that
social media unsettles space by ‘creating a quasi-
public/private space where people can express and
support causes and potentially choose an anony-
mous identity if required, but which, like a person-
alised politics, is a space encouraged by an ethos of
diversity and inclusiveness’ (McLean & Maalsen,
2013, p. 252).

Despite the largely positive accounts of feminist
use of new media described above, other scholars
characterise this relationship as rather more com-
plex and context-dependent. For instance, Larisa
Kingston Mann argues that ‘a compulsion to digital
visibility can be extremely counterproductive, even
though the mainstream press, policy and technology
discussions about new media often appear to assume
that publicity, visibility, connectedness, and access
are de facto good things for those represented’ (cited
in Losh, 2014, p. 19). Loney-Howes (2015) is also of
the view that acts of ‘speaking out’ in feminist online
spaces often ‘reflect individual forms of activism,
resistive politics, or claims for redress, rather than
collective action’ (p. 5). In other words, it appears
that feminist movements in online spaces have the
capacity to both challenge existing representations
(especially in the case of sexual violence) and also to
reinforce some of the dogmas of ‘old media’ in terms
of discourse and audience attention. The two case
studies examined below are at the transgressive end
of this spectrum, and this possibly also contributed
to their transnational, viral reception.

Case studies: anti-rape campaigns
(UK and India)

In April 2015, the hashtag #thisdoesntmeanyes went
viral by virtue of a South London–based campaign
which aims to highlight that ‘there are no blurred
lines when it comes to consent’ (Moss, 2015). It was
created by four feminists: Nathalie Gordon, Lydia
Pang, Abigail Bergstrom and Karlie McCulloch,
who took to the streets of London with photographer,
Perou, and photographed 200 women to show
that ‘no matter what a woman is wearing, she is
never “asking for it” and the mentality “she wants it”
is fundamentally wrong’ (Moss, 2015). The campaign
website is thereby a visually rich archive of profes-
sionally-shot photos of ‘real women’ in a range of
clothing, with the hashtag #thisdoesntmeanyes in the
top left-hand corner of each image. It is also partici-
patory in that it enables women not included in the
original photo exercise to upload their own image
via Instagram and use the relevant hashtag.

In addition to the above, the website is explicit in
detailing the transnational impact of the campaign,
with links to mainstream and independent media
articles from across the world (countries besides the
United Kingdom include the United States, France,
Australia, Italy, New Zealand and Mexico). The
home page features a well-designed interface that
begins with the picture of one of these ‘ordinary
women’. As one scrolls down, one’s attention is
drawn to the prominently displayed message – capi-
talised and centred – that women are never asking to
be raped, whether they wear a short skirt, or flirt on
a night out. Equally prominent below this are a num-
ber of pictures of women as well as information
about the start of the campaign. Towards the bottom
of the page, one sees logos of a number of prominent
UK-based and international media outlets that link to
stories about the widespread take-up of the #this-
doesnotmeanyes campaign. The left margin of the
page displays symbols for various social media plat-
forms, including Twitter and Facebook, thereby indicat-
ing that the page can be shared. By featuring
images of women of diverse skin and hair colours,
dress sizes, body shapes and sexual orientations, the
website creates a space that is both quasi-public/private
and inclusive. Therefore, while there isn’t a
text-based discussion of myths surrounding rape, the
campaign uses visual cues by spotlighting the ordi-
nariness of women’s clothing and bodies, and invit-
ing identification with these. This constitutes a
challenge to the spectacle-oriented representation of
sexual violence against women.

Another instance of an online anti-rape campaign
emerging in a particular cultural context, yet going
viral in a transnational sense is the ‘It’s not your
fault’ video starring Indian actress Kalki Koechlin
and video jockey Juhi Pandey. At the time of writing
in early 2016, the YouTube clip had received over
5 million views and responses from Indian as well as
non-Indian media (such as The Independent in the
United Kingdom and SBS News in Australia). The
3-minute video is a parody of rape culture created by
‘All India Backchod’ (AIB), a comedy collective
comprising Tanmay Bhat, Gursimran Khamba,
Rohan Joshi and Ashish Shakya. It appears to be a
direct satirical response to statements from certain
public figures and politicians in India who blamed
the rise in reported cases of sexual assault on every-
thing from ‘provocative clothing, working too late,
Bollywood movies and chowmein’ (Sieczkowski,
2013). In a deliberately mocking tone, Koechlin and
Pandey suggest that scientific studies suggest that
women who wear certain types of clothing invite
rape because ‘men have eyes’. They then go on to
demonstrate the outrageousness of this comment by
wearing a range of outfits (from short skirts and
dresses to burqas and raincoats) and having a red
cross sign appear on each of them. This is aimed to
demonstrate the ridiculousness of the victim-blam-
ing claims about women’s clothing in particular.
They also critique conservative people and groups
who propagate these myths by falling back on par-
ticular notions of ‘Indian culture’. These include
charismatic gurus who suggest that women who are
being assaulted should refer to the rapist as a brother to stop him. Finally, Koechlin and Pandey comment on the absence of legal redress for marital rape in India. The use of the English language and references to working women and mobile phones (as one of the many causes of rape parodied in the video) assumes a largely middle-class audience in India, yet it is precisely because of this that the campaign has achieved global reach.

At the same time, the video became viral in India as it was made in the wake of and as a complement to the populist protests that emerged after the much-reported gang rape of a medical student in New Delhi in December 2012. At the same time, the precedent for using new media for feminist activists in India was set much earlier by the ‘Pink Chaddi’ (or pink underwear) campaign. According to Subramanian (2015), it was launched in 2009 as a protest against Hindu right-wing group Sri Ram Sene’s attack on women in a pub in Mangalore (p. 71). This led to a group of women who called themselves ‘Consortium of Pub-going, Loose, and Forward Women’ to launch a Facebook group which saw close to 30,000 members in a week and a petition to send 3000 pink panties to the head of Sri Ram Sene (Subramanian, 2015, p. 71). Similar to the #thisdoesntmeanyes campaign, the use of social media in the above instances in India creates a space that is simultaneously safe and public enough for widespread outreach. The ‘It’s not your fault’ video, like the ‘Pink Chaddi’ movement, largely operates in a middle-class milieu in a nation where the vast majority still doesn’t own mobile phones. Nevertheless, their campaigning is pertinent to the Indian context and attempts to transgress conservative religious and cultural dogmas.

Both campaigns discussed here point to the complexity of transgression as an analytic concept. The act of rape is clearly, morally and legally transgressive in most societies – be it the United Kingdom or India. Yet, in the efforts to raise public awareness to the causes and consequences of this egregious social problem, activists in both countries have to resort to rhetorical strategies and discursive tactics which themselves transgress their respective cultural and gender norms. Given the specificity of the socio-cultural contexts, as well as the impact of transnational new media tools, the above campaigns can be read as largely transgressive in the modes employed to critique rape culture and intersectional in their emphasis on diversity and solidarity. In the case of #thisdoesntmeanyes, conventional notions of feminine beauty are challenged by featuring ordinary women rather than models. Using participatory platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, it also attempts to give women agency by enabling those interested in the campaign to send their own pictures. In a similar way, the ‘It’s your fault’ video is potentially unsettling for those propagating the culture of victim-blaming as it uses satire to highlight the ridiculous nature of the excuses used to hold women responsible. Therefore, these new spaces, and the modes they employ have the potential to raise awareness, effect attitudinal and legal changes, as well as build intersectional feminist solidarities.

References
Moss, R. (2015). Rape campaign #ThisDoesn’tMeanYes wants to end victim blaming and dispel myths around


Author biography

Sukhmani Khorana is a Lecturer in Media and Communication at the University of Wollongong. Previously, she was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies, University of Queensland. She is the editor of a Routledge anthology titled Crossover Cinema (2013). Khorana has published extensively on news television, diasporic film and multi-platform refugee narratives. With Kate Darian-Smith and Sue Turnbull, she holds a current ARC Linkage project with the Museum of Victoria and The Australian Centre for the Moving Image examining the role of television in the experience of migration to Australia.