NINETEEN

#BOYCOTTBOLLYWOOD: CAMOUFLAGING MISOGYNY AND ISLAMOPHOBIA IN A MOVEMENT

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Social media, particularly Twitter, have emerged as a powerful tool to organize online campaigns. As an online protest gains momentum and amasses fringe communities, it often loses its initial intent. This case can be made for the #BoycottBollywood movement, which was set up with the motive of criticizing Bollywood on its output quality and the prevalence of nepotism, but has evolved over time to be shrouded in misogyny and Islamophobia. This paper analyzes how discourse around #BoycottBollywood has developed over time and focuses on the use of #BoycottPathaan to highlight the overwhelmingly anti-Muslim and misogynistic themes that run within the movement.

Introduction and Background

In recent times, an online campaign has emerged on Twitter in an effort to boycott films coming out of the mainstream Hindi cinema industry, popularly known as Bollywood. On account of sustained and coordinated attacks prior to the release of films, there has been a great deal of speculation on whether such campaigns can actually impact the decades old film industry. The movement has also managed

to garner responses from prominent bollywood actors and actresses [1] [2].

The movement was initially presented as an argument against nepotism, with the major part of discourse being centered around biases in the film industry and it's alleged decline in quality. In this paper, I show that the actual drivers of this movement are Islamophobia and misogyny. I explore how the narrative has shifted over the course of the campaign's most active period, the forms in which certain themes emerge and how members of the community engage with these themes.

Data and Methods

I used two seed hashtags to build the dataset. "#BoycottBollywood" was used to capture the general discourse around boycotting the Hindi film industry. This data was used to identify trends in tweeting and changes in narrative. The second seed hashtag, "#BoycottPathaan" was used to collect data that exposed the anti-Muslim and misogynistic themes in the movement.

Data was then collected by using the full archive search point provided by the Twitter API. August 1, 2022 was chosen as the starting date for data collection owing to campaigns against the major box office releases in the months that followed. The data collection was concluded on January 17, 2023 in order to record activity related to the film Pathaan, which faced substantial backlash from the boycott community.

It was found that 261,586 accounts had at least once used these hashtags. This yielded a total of 2,578,256 tweets, of which 413,082 were original tweets, while the remainder were retweets, quoted tweets or replies to tweets from the original set.

To track changes in discourse, a list of keywords were prepared to capture posts revolving around Nepotism, Islam and Hinduism. This involved manually scanning through a keyword frequency list and picking out commonly used words and grouping them.

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[1]`https://www.hindustantimes.com/entertainment/bollywood/kareena-kapoor-reacts-to-boycott-bollywood-trend-at-kolkata-event-101674480874528.html`.

[2]`https://www.hindustantimes.com/entertainment/bollywood/suniel-shetty-urges-yogi-adityanath-to-help-end-boycott-bollywood-trends-101672933277889.html`.

Organising the Movement

Release Attacks

I plotted the daily post frequency for all the tweets and retweets in the dataset and annotated the peaks in the plot (see Figure 1). Most peaks are accounted for by mapping them to relevant events and looking at the tweet content for that day[3].

The majority of attacks are timed around the releases of new films. This makes sense from a virality perspective because the film is newsworthy and is reflected in which films get attacked. We see that bigger budget films like Brahmastra, Laal Singh Chaddha, and Raksha Bandhan get more sustained attacks than relatively smaller budget films Darlings and Dobaara, which undergo comparatively shorter attacks.
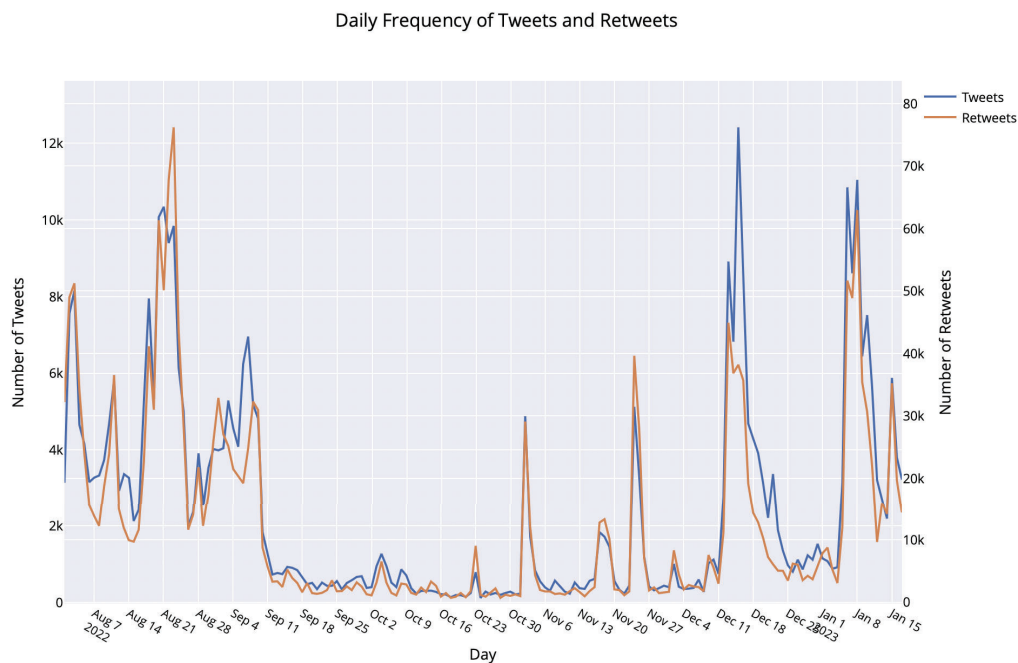
Daily Frequency of Tweets and Retweets

Figure 19.0.1: Daily timeline of the number of #BoycottBollywood Tweets and Retweets

Influencers and Ghost Accounts

A look into the user community reveals two contrasting groups of accounts that work together to push anti-Bollywood content. First group consisting of high

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[3]https://plotly.com/~sheyril/85/

influence accounts, and the second group being formed by what are characterised as ghost users.

I use the retweet network to identify influential accounts in the dataset. These accounts can be used to recognise who the key drivers of narrative within the community are. To narrow down the set of users, two thresholds are applied. First, I only consider users that have been retweeted more than 50 times in the sample. Second, I only consider edges where a user has retweeted another user more than two times. Then, using eigenvector centrality, the top 30 users that play a crucial role in the flow of information in the #BoycottBollywood community were identified.

A manual inspection of the set of 30 influential users showed that most users in this set were "SSRians" [1,4] and the second largest set consisted of accounts identified as right wing influencers.

We found that a significant proportion of the accounts that tweeted the #BoycottBollywood hashtag were in fact ghost accounts with no social media following. A total of 12,889 out of the total accounts that at least once used the hashtag had 0 followers. This suggests collusive behavior, since an account with no followers has no real incentive to flood social media with messaging. A look at their date of account creation shows that these accounts were created in the last two years, with a sudden spike in August 2022 [4].

Propaganda in Tweets

A frequently asked question is whether Boycott Bollywood is part of a broader propaganda in terms of its structure and intended targets. Fig. 19.0.2 gives some insight into how the major themes of discourse have changed based on how often they appear in a week. While discourse around the film industry and their depictions of Hinduism has been prominent since the beginning, a clear shift in focus away from nepotism is apparent from the visualisation.

Since the period in which this shift occurs coincides with the time boycotting efforts were directed towards Pathaan, the question of whether the attempts to Boycott Pathaan were even more specifically galvanized around Shah Rukh Khan's Muslim identity arises. To examine this, I explored the sub-themes in messaging about #BoycottPathaan that went viral, using a high retweet count as an indicator of virality.

I manually coded two collections of tweets: 200 most retweeted tweets and a random sample of 200 original tweets. To detect the different kinds of agendas,
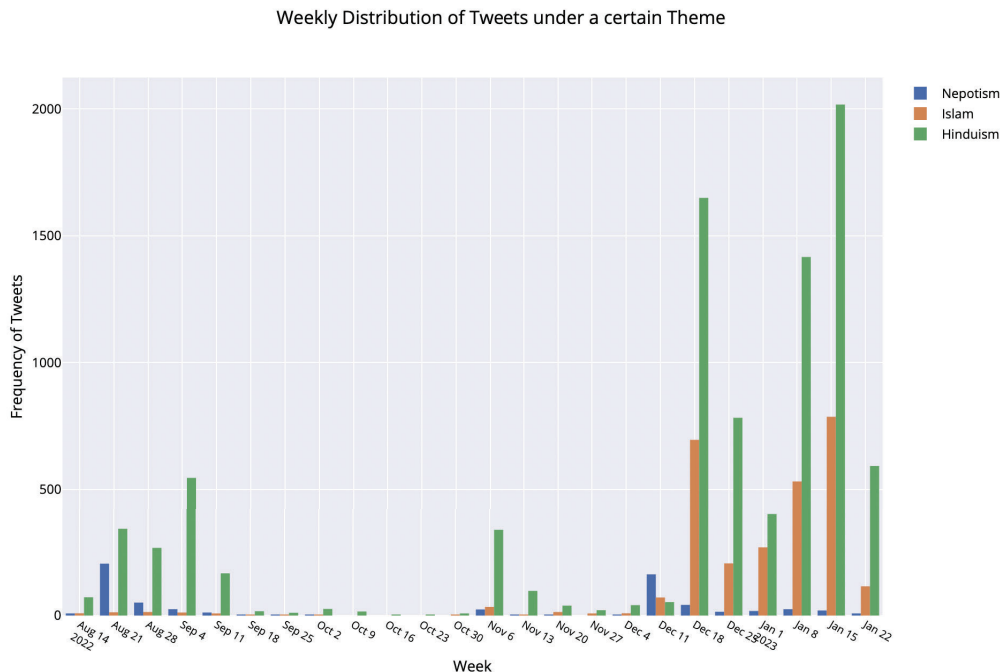
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[4]https://plotly.com/~sheyril/61/

Weekly Distribution of Tweets under a certain Theme

Figure 19.0.2: Weekly frequency of Tweets based on different narratives in the Boycott Bollywood movement

Category	Subcategory	High RTs	Random	Total
Nationalism and Culture		42	16	58
Individual Attack		69	33	102
Misogyny		32	21	53
SSR related		33	22	55

Table 19.0.1: Summary of categorical coding done on a highly retweeted set of tweets and a random sample

I make use of 5 categories. Since a tweet can have overlapping themes, these categories are non-exclusive.

Findings show that subcategories that have thematic intersections with a second area of interest are much more likely to make a tweet about Boycott Pathaan go viral. Inter-sectional propaganda, defined as having a second line of conceptual framing that aligns with a propagated partisan position in the public discourse. Thus, a notion of Muslims as incompatible with the idea of patriotic sensibility for India could be an example of such partisan positions, and would be considered propaganda, as it is typically propagated through networks via methods of coordinated messaging.

Additionally, it was found that propagandist content is much more "effective" in terms of numerical outreach. This is reflected in the highly retweeted set where 82.5% tweets identified as propaganda, as compared to the random sample in which

Figure 19.0.3: Sample of tweets related to anti-Muslim messaging

46.5% of tweets qualified for the same, and we find this result to be significant (T-test, $P < 0.05$). So, the first conclusion here is that at the top end of the spectrum, i.e. the most retweeted messages about Pathaan, some co-located element of intersectional propaganda is more likely to be present.

While lower toxicity and propaganda in the random sample can be partly explained by unrelated tweets, it is evident that toxic content generates more reaction from users. I verify this by comparing engagement metrics like likes, retweets, quotes and replies between toxic and non-toxic tweets for the combined sample of 400 tweets.

To do so, I ran a T test to check whether there was a significant difference in engagement when the tweet contained inflammatory content. There is a significant increase across all metrics in cases where we detected some kind of toxic content. Additionally, on average, toxic tweets receive twice as many likes and retweets as compared to non-toxic tweets.

Use of Anti-Muslim Rhetoric

We see in Table 19.0.1 that Religion and Nationalism are the two overwhelmingly large categories of intersection. The basic argument for the Boycott Pathaan messaging is either to attack one of the core characters for their religion (i.e, Shahrukh Khan as a Muslim) or to present the overall idea of patronizing the film as anti-Hindu (see Fig. 19.0.3).

An important construct within nationalism is the notion of culture, and by extension, a definition of what is legitimate and illegitimate culture [2,5]. We find that language is an important element of culture – thus the term "Urduwood" is
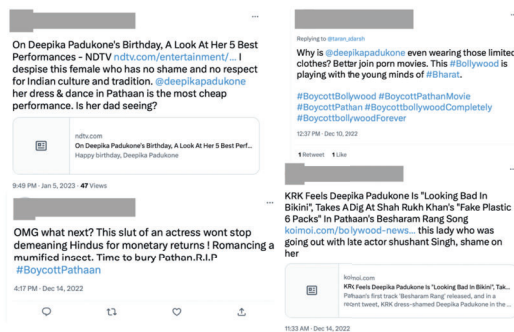
Figure 19.0.4: Sample of tweets trolling actress Deepika Padukone

frequently used, suggesting that Urdu speakers are by definition culturally incompatible with India. Interestingly, in the last several years, the use of Urdu script to introduce a Hindi film has declined dramatically, suggesting that filmmakers want to avoid ruffling feathers on this issue.

Misogynistic Themes

The second related element of cultural exclusion is the use of misogyny. The use of misogyny is in and of itself used as a means of suggesting cultural incompatibility, especially with an abstract notion of Indian tradition.

We see two major channels of misogyny here. One, that is directed towards Deepika Padukone, the lead actress in Pathaan who was excessively trolled for her appearance in the song "Besharam Rang" (see Fig. 19.0.4).

Out of the 134,953 tweets that use #BoycottPathaan, we select 12,636 tweets that make a direct reference to the actress in their text. Next, we generate a list of most common words used in tweet text and filter out words pertaining to body shaming and moral policing. We then divide these keywords into categories to capture 3 main themes:

- Body/Slut Shaming: bikini, body, nudity, clothes, softp0rn, porn

- Insults: cheap, shame, bollywoodkigandagi, vulgar, disgusting, cringe

- Moral Policing: toxic, values, culture, india, hindu

We find that the category with the biggest collection of tweets was "Moral Policing", with 1,306 tweets that try to convey how various components of the film and its songs will affect Hindu culture and Indian values. Following this, the second biggest category was "Insults", with 754 tweets. While Body/Slut shaming tweets were smaller in number (398), their tweet content was much more toxic.
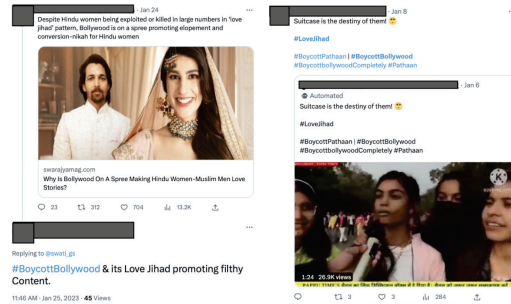
Figure 19.0.5: Sample of tweets connecting Bollywood with Love Jihad

Another kind of misogynistic messaging that adds a direct dimension of anti-Muslim prejudice intersecting with the misogynistic messaging, was the discourse around "love jihad". This includes media (see Fig. 19.0.5) as well as heavy use of hashtags like "#LoveJihaad" and "#LoveJihad_ActOfTerrorism".

Discussion and Future work

While Indian Twitter has been routinely used to launch boycotting campaigns [3], #BoycottBollywood provides insights into the evolution of online activism and about what really drives a movement. This paper presents two main findings. First, an inspection of popular tweets shows #BoycottBollywood's thinly veiled effort to move towards Hindu nationalism, central to which is the idea of integrating religion, nationalism and culture. Second, while past work has presented extensively studied criticisms [6,7], in the Hindi film industry around its problematic portrayal of women, caste and religion, it can be seen that the #BoycottBollywood community depends on similar methods to spread their narrative.

This study can be further extended to link changes in narrative to changes in the social network and influencers in order to answer whether discourse shifts organically or if it's a strategy to enlist more users. Moreover, this raises some important questions about the role fringe communities play in the evolution of online movements.

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