



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

The terror of Dhaka University’s guest room culture



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Getting into Dhaka University is a dream-come-true for many, but those dreams are usually shattered when students encounter the harsh reality of this institution. Generally, new students cannot get accommodation in the dormitories – or residential halls. For those who do not have relatives nearby or the financial means to arrange off-campus accommodation, residential halls are their only option. However, the hall administrations ignore the students’ plight by citing a lack of vacancy. Taking advantage of this situation, leaders of the student wing of the ruling political party place these unfortunate students in *gono* (common) rooms.

Take the case of Zahid, who enrolled at DU in 2018, for example. Attached to Surja Sen Hall, he was denied a room when he sought accommodation from the hall administration. Left with no alternative, Zahid appealed to a political leader and was ultimately allotted a space in one of the hall’s gono rooms. This is a common story for almost all freshers at DU.

Every hall has at least one *gono* room. And the term lives up to its name. While a *gono* room is meant to house only four students, it is usually crammed with almost 20 people. The freshers do not have proper beds, lack basic hygiene facilities, and there is no space for even a study table. The rooms are akin to prisons, and during summer these rooms become hell on earth.

While the nightmare begins with gono room placements, more sinister events follow soon after. At night, Chhatra League’s second-

year partymen summon first-year students and direct the latter to the hall’s guest room, supposedly a place of hospitality. Far from a warm welcome, what the freshers experience there is nothing but hostility, alongside mental and physical torture. The guest room is synonymous with ragging or hazing; it is a place where the notion of senior students being supportive mentors quickly crumbles. A first-year student is taught “etiquette and manners,” such as greeting seniors in a specific way, attending political programmes of Chhatra League, staying on call at all times, and not criticising the government. Those who fail to comply face brutal punishment, and even expulsion, from the halls.

Although all halls have actual guest rooms, the term has lost its literal meaning and is now used to categorise the manner of abuse that occurs in any of the hall’s rooms. Informally, there are three types of guest rooms: general, mini, and single. In the general ones, all freshers stand amid their seniors every day and bear a flurry of profanities for their so-called misconduct; the profanities sometimes turn into physical violence. Mini rooms are more brutal than their general counterparts. There, a selective number of freshers with “severe faults” are abused. In the single guest rooms, only one victim is targeted and abused both verbally and physically within the four walls. Most of the severe levels of torture happen in the mini and single guestrooms.

Our recent study found that 27 DU students were tortured, mentally and/or physically, in 2022. However, we are aware that the actual number could be quite higher. Most incidents of torture go unreported as the victims are forced to stay silent. They are intimidated to such an extent that they sometimes withdraw complaints or do not even dare to complain to the authorities, thinking that the administration will not ensure justice. This shows a lack of trust in authority, which is sometimes tacitly responsible for perpetuating this guest room culture. In August last year, Chhatra League leaders confined a student over a message criticising their political programmes. Later on, after checking the victim’s smartphone and accusing him of militancy, the hall provost handed him over to the police. The police, finding no *prima facie* evidence against the student, let him go.

Due to such incidents, victims prefer seeking solace and justice by publicising their suffering, talking about their condition through social channels, hoping for societal redress and resistance.

The hall administrations, even after being fully aware that Chhatra League assigns seats in the halls, turn a blind eye to this matter. The administrations’ tacit compliance is deeply concerning. The provosts and house tutors sweep aside their role in monitoring abuse while political leaders rule the halls.

Instead of turning a blind eye, it is incumbent upon the hall administrations to take action against all illegal residents, prioritise the welfare of freshers, and prevent guest room torture. As the campus is buzzing with the arrival of freshers, this is a call for transforming Dhaka University into a nurturing academic institution, driven by goodwill and structural changes. If the administration truly values the ideals of an academic atmosphere, it will surely find ways to ensure the rights and dignity of every student on campus.

Dear marketing gurus, don’t take consumers for idiots

The make-believe world of advertising and selling



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Can a hand-washing liquid with added vitamins give any health benefits? Well, a consumer-product manufacturer claims just that.

Increasingly, making false claims and presenting distorted facts have become a trend to increase sales. Another such company brags that you can have all the nutritional benefits of an egg without eating one because their shampoos and conditioners are combined with all the good eggy things. A detergent company smirks because it sells soap bars in huge numbers by stating that these have “the cleaning power of blue and orange!” (What on earth could that mean?) Perhaps the epitome of a bizarre commercial is one advertising a “halal soap.” It became so successful – in misleading consumers – that Professor Philip Kotler mentioned it in his book *Principles of Marketing*. But wait, there is another, even more bizarre (and outrageous) example I am coming to in a while.

It’s not just the big corporations

must rely on visual inspection, your experience with that seller, and market opinion.

But fruit sellers or sweets traders are petty operators compared to the corporations selling unnecessary things by creating a false sense of need with sleek advertising campaigns. When I complained about TV channels showing too many commercials, a friend reminded me of the Greek philosopher Socrates. His well-off disciples took him to a marketplace to show him all the luxurious things, while the more loyal ones were uneasy about how the master might react. But he only said, “How many things I can do without!” Then, my friend added what *he* had to say: the TV channels are doing their job of informing the public of its needs, which people wouldn’t otherwise know of.

Of course, advertising is not only a consumer society thing. Politics, international affairs, warfare, mainstream news, social media and

that much of it was a lie.

Duterte heavily manipulated public opinion in the Philippines before the 2016 presidential election using fake Facebook feeds. But don’t make him the only one responsible. In 2013, Facebook, in a bid to increase its user base, started subsidising internet access to the platform on mobile devices in countries where cellular data was not affordable for many despite having smartphones. With 100 million people, the Philippines was the perfect ground for testing this out. Facebook offered them “free Facebook” without caring about how it might be abused by Duterte’s campaign managers (marketing experts). He won, which everyone saw. But few realised that the bigger winner was Facebook. It has since been used worldwide to spread disinformation, one instance of which likely contributed to the 2017 Rohingya genocide in Myanmar. Amnesty International stated, “In the months and years leading up to the atrocities, Facebook’s algorithms were intensifying a storm of hatred against the Rohingya, which contributed to real world violence.”

In a sleek marketing campaign, again, the current Russia-Ukraine war is presented as a direct outcome of Putin’s invasion. But the root cause of the conflict remains unaddressed, which Joseph S Nye, Jr, a professor at Harvard University and a former US assistant secretary of defence, makes adequately clear in his op-ed “What



PHOTO: REUTERS

Increasingly, making false claims and presenting distorted facts about products have become a trend to increase sales.

selling things by making out of this-world claims about their products. When I buy a piece of papaya, pineapple or a kilogram of oranges, the seller almost invariably endorses it as extremely sweet (*kora mishti* in Bangla). “Don’t pay now; take it home and enjoy, and pay me only if it’s sweet,” they add without a wink. Of course, you will not do that, but instead pay for it in good faith. Depending on your luck, the fruit can be sweet or sour, but that has nothing to do with the seller’s pitch.

Point to any item in a sweets shop and ask, “When did this come in?” The answer is always, “Just a while ago.” Never will any seller say that the sweets were made the previous day or earlier. Before buying, you

everything else use marketing to attract attention, manipulate public opinion, distort facts, and spread misinformation and disinformation. In 1997-98, when then US President Clinton was deep in the Monica Lewinsky mess, he tried to absolve himself by using a strongly worded, dramatically phrased, meticulously scripted sentence, “I did not have sexual relations with that woman.” He had.

President George W Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair jointly launched a massive misinformation campaign on Saddam’s imaginary stockpile of weapons of mass destruction to justify their 2003 military assault on millions of Iraqis. The US administration later admitted

Caused the Ukraine War?” Most news outlets manipulate public opinion by putting the West on a high moral ground, making Moscow the sole villain.

The ultimate winner, however, is whitening creams. All consumer product makers sell it with the promise of lightening one’s skin tone despite the product’s high health risks. But the sellers portray it as a beauty enhancer, thus creating an otherwise non-existent need. This is the ultimate in marketing that is downright disgraceful, humiliating, racial, discriminatory, and devoid of morality or ethics.

Finally, you don’t need a fancy hand wash at home. A simple soap is adequate to wash your hands.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Yard tool

5 Terre Haute’s river

11 Farm team

12 Broad street

13 Pub orders

14 Dock worker

15 Pledge of

Allegiance noun

17 Cruise setting

18 Steer clear of

22 Prepared

24 Derivative look

25 Caribou’s kin

26 Quarterback

Manning

27 Vote in

30 Thicket

32 Surgery tool

33 Pound sound

34 Knot-tying

38 Red Cross location

41 Gumbo base

42 Penitent

person

43 Floral rings

44 Clash

45 Spot

DOWN

1 Stadium sound

2 Auto bar

3 Mementos

4 Followed as a result

5 Mural spot

6 Steers clear of

7 Sailing signal

8 Plus

9 Take to court

10 That woman

16 Howl at the moon

19 Counterfeit videos

20 Salon supplies

21 Buffalo’s lake

22 Lively folk dance

23 Singer

Fitzgerald

28 Sidewalk stuff

29 See the world

30 Compact, e.g.

31 Meadowlark’s cousin

35 Quite uncommon

36 Hold tightly

37 Relaxed

38 Yak it up

39 Pilot’s guess: Abbr.

40 Word of denial

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

P A S T F I D G E T

A C M E A R I A N A

C R U X Z I N G E R

K E G V E S T

G L I D E S A W

J U L I A S I N C E

E R I N R U N S

A G N E S R O G E T

N E G T H O N G

Q U A D L I D

A B D U C T T I D E

B O D I C E A N O N

C A S T O R U G L Y