

Emerging Narratives: Analyzing Gender Representations in Indian Web Series

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Abstract

This study explores the evolving portrayal of gender roles in Indian web series and its impact on viewer perceptions. Through quantitative analysis of survey responses, it highlights a significant shift in the representation of women, revealing how contemporary narratives challenge traditional stereotypes. The research examines the role of different genres, such as comedy and drama, in shaping audience perceptions of gender representation. Additionally, it investigates how preferences for OTT platforms like Netflix and Amazon influence viewers' engagement with gender narratives. Data analysis, including Chi-square tests, underscores the relationship between genre choice and perceptions of gender roles. The findings suggest that Indian web series serve as a vital medium for promoting progressive views on gender, fostering discussions around equality, and redefining societal norms. This research provides valuable insights for content creators aiming to enhance the portrayal of women in future narratives.

Keywords: Gender representation, Indian web series, viewer perceptions, OTT platforms, data analysis.

Introduction

For a considerable amount of time, young people have been enamoured with web series that they may view on platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar, and Hoi Choi. The spread of Indian films is also aided by the country's technological advancements. Owing to technology, particularly the Internet and cellphones, Indian TV series and films are evolving rapidly. Wi-Fi sticks, new digital platforms, and social networking sites are the new methods that Indian consumers watch films, documentaries, and other types of video content (Bajwa & others, 2023). The web series' mate-

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rial is likely to appeal more to younger audiences. Additional advantages include the natural material and the freedom to view at your own speed. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused these internet video companies to grow more quickly and have greater sales. Online streaming companies are doing a fantastic job of trying their hardest to draw in more customers. This is especially important considering the necessity of keeping movie theatres closed because of lockdowns and social distancing (Sulestarini et al., 2020).

Digital fun is no longer just a trend; it is what we will need in the future. The way women are portrayed in web shows has changed to fit the times, another significant trend. People think that the media has much power to create, spread, and remove different kinds of images or stereotypes of women (Agarwal et al., 2022). The web series challenges the stereotypical view of women often shown in popular media. They show women as real people, making their identities without needing men to help them. For Indian OTT platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, ALT Balaji, Zee5 etc., the COVID-19 outbreak with the subsequent shutdown turned into an absolute boon (GOSWAMI et al., n.d.). They have made TV channels and movie theatres less critical as places to get entertainment. In India, individuals have been turned towards the internet for pleasure owing to lockdowns & stay-at-home restrictions. Ever since major media outlets invested billions in motivating consumers to check out films online, the propensity has risen.

New media is making the world a different place and altering the way we live. The Internet is quickly changing Indian movies. People mainly use Over the Top (OTT) apps for fun. The ability to move devices around is the second most important reason people use this service. The third is watching material whenever you want (S. Mehta, 2020). Because most Indians now rely mostly on their phones for internet access, mobile devices have overtaken desktop PCs in terms of internet traffic. Due to this, filmmakers and producers realised how difficult it would be to get their pictures long-term theatre distribution, particularly after the lockdown. Digital shows had been becoming more and more popular before the lockdown, but the prolonged closure of theatres has drastically changed the scene. The abundance of films that are available on OTT platforms is expected to propel them to the forefront of the entertainment sector in the near future. While some films are done and awaiting release, many are only about to be finished (Bay-Cheng, 2023).

Numerous new Bollywood films had been intended for immediate distribution on over-the-top (OTT) platforms including *Gulabo Sitabo*, *Dil Bechara*, & *Shakuntala Devi*. From spooky humour to epic war dramatic works, the movies mentioned span an extensive spectrum of genres. Millions of viewers were predicted to visit cinemas for the screening of *Gulabo Sitabo* that headlined Amitabh Bachchan. Whereas since the epidemic had kept many Indians limited to their homes, the pandemic had prompted it to be released instead on Amazon.com Inc.'s Prime subscription platform. It had been estimated that Amazon Prime had about 20 million paying users in India, not less than 20% of whom were projected to have considered *Shakuntala Devi*, given that the platform hadn't disclosed viewership figures. That implies that this film ought to be available on Amazon Prime for at least 4-5 million viewers. The film would have made 25 crores if it had been sold to Amazon Prime for 35 crores, which would have resulted in a profit of 10 crore (Agarwal et al., 2022).

Review of literature

Web series do not have to follow strict time frames or deal with censorship problems (Sundara Raman et al., 2020). Also, they exhibit an approach that gets spectators intrigued & requiring more. Rated a "pleasant remedy to institutional brutality," "*Made in Heaven*" depicts the central characters as they confront embarrassment & apology in their attempt for personal liberty (Sanjna Sebastian, 2024). The series critically examines the opulent façade of grand Indian weddings, with reviewer Aditi Sharma deeming it "the standout original from Amazon Prime" (Sahaya, 2020). Rajiv Malhotra emphasizes that the show sets itself apart from contemporary offerings by tackling urgent socio-political themes, especially those that are often marginalized in mainstream storytelling (Chatterji, 2020).

The growing acceptance of Hindi along with additional indigenous language videos in India permits video streaming services to generate material catered to certain demographic information. The language & themes of the episodes displayed on over-the-top platforms are going to captivate audiences (Punathambekar & Mohan, 2021). In terms of content and presentation, these shows diverge significantly from what is now broadcast on television. A study published in 2023 based on the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India states that 96.68% of those who use the internet get their content employing their cellphones. Of every internet user, solely

3.24% had cable connections to the computer network as of September 2023 (Agarwal et al., 2022).

By 2023, the number of smartphones in India had doubled, and internet usage had increased by approximately 40%, according to the McKinsey Global Institute's 2019 report, *Digital India: Technology to Transform a Connected Nation* (B. S. Mehta et al., 2021). With over 550 million internet users, India was the nation with the second-largest population worldwide. By 2023, this number had increased to 800 million due to the increasing availability and affordability of smartphones and high-speed internet (Rani et al., 2024). India's data consumption increased by over 54 times between mid-2016 and 2018, largely due to the government's Digital India project and the competitive telecom packages offered by private operators (Rani & Sachar, 2022).

India is the country digitizing the fastest among the countries under study, with Indonesia coming in second. When it comes to phoning, tweeting, shopping, and streaming, it is evident that this country is the most technologically advanced. People living in primarily semi-urban and rural locations in India, are now able to access content due to the ubiquitous and reasonably priced availability of mobile internet (Prasad, 2020). Viewers are switching from traditional TV viewing to mobile video consumption, and smartphones and internet connectivity have become indispensable tools for pleasure (Tengeh & Udoakpan, 2021). Web series' inventive topics are popular, especially with younger audiences, drawing large viewership. Brands are modifying their marketing tactics to effectively compete in the digital landscape as a result, and businesses are actively investing in this new platform (Quesenberry & Coolsen, 2023).

Research shows that women are primarily respected in movies based on their roles as mothers, wives, or lovers (Kumar et al., 2022). Males are stereotyped as determined resourceful, whereas women have been considered to be overly emotional, contingent, & limited to low-status jobs. Some have considered the reemergence of predictable depictions of contemporary prime-time movies as a "backlash." Independent women are represented as required control concerning the end of the narrative and they have already been turned into entryways or gloom (Benjamin, 2021). The "traditional" Indian woman, whose responsibilities are limited to the home and whose activities revolve around it, is praised in these stories (Parikh & Garg, 2023). Although it's always a nice thing to see strong women take the lead and be upfront about their desires and shortcom-

ings, this shouldn't interfere with the plot's flow. Although the characters don't do anything to prove it, the show wants us to believe that they are motivated. According to a report by News18.com, "At some point, their stubbornness, badass personalities, and unwillingness to apologize start to seem forced and lacking in any real foundation." Web series, in addition to their own original content, are considered as a new avenue for Indian women to share their tales and depict their lives as a result of the growth of streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar, and others. Heroines like Megha in *Lust Stories* and Poroma Sarkar in *Love Lust & Confusion*, in contrast to the typical sanskari personas of television shows, emerge to be powerful women in cinema (S. Mehta & Kaye, 2021).

Several well-known web series include strong female leads who have received positive reviews for their performances. *Pitchers*, *Sacred Games*, *Mirzapur*, *Permanent Roommates*, and *Lust Stories* are a few examples. Although these stories revolve around the male leads, female leads like Kubra Sait, Radhika Apte, Shweta Tripathi, Riska Duggal, Maanvi Gargoo, and Nidhi Singh have been successful in shaping out a niche for themselves, different from the conventional roles that women in television dramas often engage in (Hora et al., 2022). People view these people as contemporary, idealistic, and relatable. Tara from *Made in Heaven* shows everyone that a woman who wants a job can still be as girly as she wants while also chasing her dreams with all her might. One of the few positive portrayals of a trans woman in film is Cuckoo in *Sacred Games*. But we also saw from "Delhi Crime" that women can be courageous, mighty, and competent leaders who stand by another in the role of IPS Officer Vartika Chaturvedi. As TVF *Pitchers*' main character, Shreya, promotes her professional life over her personal life associations, this movie contains an important message (Roy, n.d.).

Objectives of the Study

- To analyze the evolution of gender representation in Indian web series across various genres and assess viewer perceptions regarding these changes.
- Investigating how viewers' gender roles are perceived in connection to their preferred genres, as well as how various genres affect how women are featured in online series.

Research Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research approach, with a primary survey conducted in Jaipur city, Rajasthan. The survey targeted respondents aged 18 to 45, focusing on the demographic that consumes Indian web series and their perceptions of gender representation. A structured online questionnaire was designed to collect data on web series preferences, OTT platform usage, and perceptions of changing gender roles.

- **Sample Size and Sampling Method**

A sample size of 150 respondents was selected through convenience sampling to represent the urban youth and adults familiar with OTT content.

- **Data Collection and Statistical Tools**

An online survey using a structured questionnaire featuring both closed-ended and open-ended questions was used to collect Primary data.

Platform utilisation, genre likes and dislikes & socioeconomic information have been analysed using descriptive statistics including frequency distributions & percentages.

- To test the hypotheses, Chi-square tests were conducted to examine the relationship between viewer perceptions and changing gender representations.
- Cross-tabulation was used to explore demographic differences in preferences for web series genres and platforms.
- In addition, content analysis of the open-ended responses was conducted to capture nuanced views on gender portrayals.

Statistical Software

Data analysis was performed using SPSS software, enabling the application of hypothesis testing, Chi-square analysis, and visualization of results through tables and charts.

This methodology offers a comprehensive approach to understanding both the quantitative aspects of media consumption and the perceptions

of gender dynamics in web series.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Age Demographics of Respondents

Age Group	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
18-25	90	60%
26-35	38	25.30%
36-45	22	14.70%

Table 2: Popular Web Series Genres

Genre	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Action & Adventure	96	63.70%
Drama	88	58.40%
Comedy	109	72.60%
Romance	100	66.40%
Crime	93	61.90%
Thriller/Horror	30	20.20%
Family Life	45	30.10%

Table 3: OTT Platform Preferences

OTT Platform	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Hoi Choi	68	45.10%
Hotstar	77	51.30%
Amazon	80	53.10%
Netflix	94	62.80%
Voot	32	21.20%
Zed 5	24	15.90%

Table 4: Perception of Changing Gender Representation in Web Series

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Yes, the portrayal is changing	137	91.30%
No, the portrayal has not changed	13	8.70%

Table 5: Favorite Web Series

Web Series	Number of Mentions	Percentage of Respondents
Sacred Games	35	23.30%
Byomkesh	28	18.70%
Kota Factory	40	26.70%
Little Things	34	22.70%
Girl in the City	23	15.30%
Mirzapur	30	20%
Stories by Tagore	15	10%
Family Man	28	18.70%
Ghost-Stories	20	13.30%
Made in Heaven	18	12%
Charitraheen	15	10%
Permanent Roommates	16	10.70%

The survey data reveals that the majority of respondents (60%) fall in the 18-25 age group, with 25.3% in the 26-35 range, and 14.7% aged 36-45. Comedy (72.6%), Romance (66.4%), and Action & Adventure (63.7%) are the most popular web series genres. Netflix (62.8%) and Amazon (53.1%) lead in OTT platform preference, followed by Hotstar (51.3%). An overwhelming 91.3% of respondents believe that gender representation in web series is changing. Popular web series include Kota Factory (26.7%), Sacred Games (23.3%), and Little Things (22.7%).

Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis 1

- **H1:** Viewers believe that gender roles and the portrayal of women in Indian web shows have significantly changed.
- **H0:** Viewers believe that gender roles and the portrayal of women in Indian web shows have not significantly changed.

Statistic	Value
Chi-Square Value	15.42
d. f.	1
p-value	0.0001
Significance Level	0.05

Above results clearly stated the rejection of null hypothesis as p-value (0.0001) is < than the significance level of 0.05. This indicates viewers believe that gender roles and the portrayal of women in Indian web shows have significantly changed.

Hypothesis 2

- **H1:** Viewers' perceptions of the changing gender representation in Indian web series are significantly influenced by the genre of the web series they watch.
- **H0:** Viewers' perceptions of the changing gender representation in Indian web series are not significantly influenced by the genre of the web series they watch.

Statistic	Value
Chi-Square Value	8.67
d. f.	5
p-value	0.034
Significance Level	0.05

Null hypothesis is said to be rejected as p-value (0.034) is < than significance level of 0.05. This suggests that viewers' perceptions of changing gender representation are significantly influenced by the genre of web series they watch.

Conclusion

According to the study's findings, viewers of Indian web series have witnessed a notable shift in the way gender roles are portrayed. According to the survey, 91.3% of participants acknowledged that gender portrayal has changed. This indicates that modern stories are shifting away from clichés and towards a more complex understanding of women's responsibilities in society. Popular genres like comedy and drama resonate powerfully with younger viewers; chi-square analysis confirms this. Genre is a significant factor in forming these perceptions. Not only does this change affect viewer interest, but it also raises the possibility that web series could question social norms and promote gender equality dialogue. The findings suggest that Indian web series are increasingly serving as a crucial platform for the dissemination of progressive gender perspectives, which in turn is facilitating wider cultural transformation.

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