



RESEARCH ARTICLE

New gender representation on the Indian OTT platform: A study on web series “Made in Heaven”

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Abstract

This paper studies new gender representation in the popular web series “Made in Heaven”, released on an Indian OTT platform. The key aspect of Indian OTT platforms is that neither the visual nor the ideological content is restricted or controlled. As a result, the content makers are choosing OTT platforms to produce unconventional gender content like bi-sexuality, trans- sexuality, homosexuality, and asexuality. The methodology used in conceptualizing the findings of this paper is a sequential analysis of the internet movies database (IMDb) reviews. Amazon subsidiary IMDb is an online database where the audience can find information about cinema, television, OTT, video games, etc. Also, the reviews and feedback of the audience are subjected to detailed analysis to create a conceptual framework for the effect of such unconventional media content on Indian society. The paper concludes with a detailed discussion of the findings and presents a brief study on the impact of unconventional content on Indian society.

Keywords: New gender, Queer Representation, OTT Media, Homosexuality, Trans- sexuality, LGBTQ, Gender, Society.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the sociology of sexuality has completely changed the understanding of new gender community. After the repeal of Article 377 of the IPC (Mondal, 2021), people with different sexual orientations in society started revealing themselves. Different sexuality like queer and transgender, is now a very common term in the Indian “traditional” society. Aggressive sexual awareness of LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, gay, bi-Sexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual and more) has made it possible to identify themselves and raise their voice for their societal identity. In examining these sexual trends, we observe the influence of global media and their contributions to understanding the role of different sexual orientations. The Indian OTT media is one of the components to conclude with

the contributions of the creators who are making society understand the sexual orientations that are “normal” and “natural”. Queer represents any gender identity or sexual orientation that is not a heterosexual category or cisgender category (Love, 2014). In common terms, ‘Queer’ can function as a noun, an adjective, or a verb, but in each case is defined against the ‘normal’ or normalizing (Foucault, 1985).

Queer is formally associated with desires and sexual practices, and transgender is about gender identifications and expressions and non-normative (Popa and Gavrilu, 2015). Because of this, it is difficult to distinguish between queer and transgender theoretically and practically. The OTT platforms, like Amazon Prime, Netflix, and Disney+ Hotstar, are changing the conservative attitude towards diverse sexualities. The diversity in gender and sexuality holds the power to influence society and gives public visibility to marginalized communities (Maulana, 2021). Dhar 2021 said that streaming platforms are playing a vital role in changing the thought process of society and communicating a realistic approach toward queer representation on OTT platforms (Dhar, 2021).

Made in Heaven is an Amazon Prime Web series released on March 8, 2019, by the directors Zoya Akhtar and Reema Kagti. This fictional story portrays two protagonists, Tara Khanna and Karan Mehta, who are partners in a wedding planning venture called “Made in Heaven.” With 8.3 IMDb ratings, the series speaks about the traditional hustle with modern aspirations against big fat Indian weddings.

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How to cite this article: Dey, A. (2024). New gender representation on the Indian OTT platform: A study on web series “Made in Heaven”. *The Scientific Temper*, 15(1):1901-1906.

Doi: 10.58414/SCIENTIFICTEMPER.2024.15.1.43

Source of support: Nil

Conflict of interest: None.

With the abolishment of section 377 in 2018, the OTT space grabbed the opportunity to redefine the meaning of “mainstream” content. It is challenging for the makers to create content that is yet to be approved by society (Dhar, 2021). However, the beginning of the change looks different with the proliferation of streaming services.

The visual language of queer representation in media is a comparatively new area of research. OTT is an entirely new segment in the Indian media market. It is getting easy for filmmakers to produce content freely and artistically as it is untouched by censorship (Isa *et al.*, 2020). The OTT platforms rigorously produce content like *Four More Shots*, *Made in Heaven*, *Call my Agent*, *Feels like Ishq*, etc so that the research window for queer representation in the visual language gets open. The visual language of queer representation not only brings the love, romance, and identity struggle of the community (Mukhopadhyay and Banerjee, 2021). It emphasizes the people living on the side streams and re-affirms their reality beyond the limitations of normality.

Literature Review

The OTT platforms have evolved and given enough space to underrepresented communities. Women, as the content was visually pleasing and creators used to convey them as a representation of sensuality. To address this gap of nuance and sensuality, the makers depict queer characters and objectify them on the screen. Gender stereotypes have always been prevalent in the pictures depicted in media material. Stereotypical representations of males, females, and transgender people have been detailed in various media content for the most part. However, changes in the representation of men and women may be seen as a result of the internet’s influence (Dasgupta, 2018). The public image carried by the media content, especially in OTT media, contributes to the education of the public on the negative perspectives of sexism (Popa and Gavrilu, 2015).

Criticism of queerness, normality, and normativeness as a counter to “not just society’s normal behavior, but the idea of normal behavior” is at the centre of queer studies. Queer is such a simple, unassuming little word (Halperin, 2003). In simple words, queer can be defined as ‘Strange,’ ‘Odd,’ or ‘Unusual. Queerness is primarily associated with non-confirmative desires and behaviors, and transgender is primarily allied with gender identities as well as embodiment, as well as studies on sexuality; we see queer studies as an important field that questions stable identity categories. Foucault (1985) sees sexuality not as an innate identity but as a tool and influential agent of the web of discursive and political strategy (Foucault, 1985; Rodgers, 2012). The use of “queer” ranges from simply describing characters that are not heterosexually identified and on-screen physical acts that are non-normative to un-normative, cross-border engagements, personalities, relationships, desires, and behaviors and to show the joy created inside and out. “Queer

media” is seen as “a place of fantasy, play and projection” as well as a way of “resisting certain processes of representation and mediation to create otherness.” Kanwar and Singh (2021), in their study “Emerging Gender Role Representation in Indian Media- Thematic Analysis of “Four More Shots Please” explained that gender portrayal in the media impacts people’s perceptions of the different gender roles that society has assigned to them (Kanwar and Singh, 2021).

In the current entertainment scenario, Indian and global audiences have taken OTT platforms as one of their favorite entertainment platforms. As a result, among the 1.38 billion population in India, 96 million subscriptions are paid and active (Balakumar, 2021). According to a website named Statista.com, by 2026, 3930.3 million users will be found on the OTT platform (Statista, n.d.). OTT or over the top defines the media service that interacts with the audience through the internet. Media services via the internet are massive and do not have any limitations. Before releasing the films, they should get certification from the regulatory body or the censor board.

However, some television content or OTT content demands nudity, sensuality, and queer to justify the product. As a result, the creators of OTT media content are misusing the independence of portraying queer. In some instances, the creators use the concept of nudity of men and women on the OTT platforms to grab audience engagement for business benefits. These kinds of portrayals touch all our society’s genders but affect women mainly. However, in the West and India, gender violence and misogyny are seen as an expression of tradition and culture (Krishnan, 2015). Globally, the audience is accepting OTT platforms as “New Television” for diverse content and entertainment. Pandit and Parmar (2020) stated that the media content given through OTT platforms offers varied shows; few of them have valiant content that is impossible to air on mainstream Indian television (Pandit & Parmar, 2020).

Media is fundamental to what eventually characterizes our social actualities (Brooks and Hébert, 2006). Audience behavior is also essential for content creators and producers to understand (Rajamany and Rajamany, 2020). Sometimes OTT platforms misuse understanding of sex differences as it is rooted biologically. Race is also a social construction, just as gender is a social construct by which a society defines what it means to be feminine or masculine (Dhar, 2021). Prominent examples like *Four More Shots* (Amazon Prime), *Made in Heaven* (Amazon Prime), *Feels like Ishq* (Netflix), and *Tiny Pretty Things* (Netflix) successfully stand out with queerness and the real complexities of society. Although the representation of females in media has increased, the inherent sexism and queer are still actively evident (Mukhopadhyay and Banerjee, 2021).

To summarize, there is a great influence of OTT platforms on queer and a high need for the media authorities to transform the current censorship policies to minimize the ill

effects of media content on culture. In this case, an example is the country of China, which imposed apparent censorship on OTT media content to protect its culture and norms (Isa *et al.*, 2020). The irony is that instances of media queer and harassment are often reframed as 'acceptable' by a few sections of society and are blanketing the same as 'humor'. Most studies have pointed out the need for further research on this critical issue. As OTT platforms play an essential role in determining the direction of perspectives of the viewers and their behavioral aspects, the findings of the reviewed studies confirm the relevance and importance of a comparative study to understand and interpret the various aspects of queer in media.

Summary of the Series

'Made in Heaven' is an Indian OTT series broadcasted on Amazon Prime Video and directed by Zoya Akhtar and Reema Kagti. The series contains 9 episodes and was released in 2019. The series starts with two protagonists, Tara Khanna and Karan Mehra, the co-owners of a wedding planning agency, Made in Heaven in South Delhi. Tara is an ambitious entrepreneur and married to Adil Khanna, a wealthy industrialist. On the other Tara's business partner, Karan Mehta, is a closeted homosexual who struggles with financial situations. Each episode in the series portrays the lavish wedding of the South Delhiites and societal constraints related to the marriage, like inter-caste marriage, Dowry involvement in a progressive society, wedding of an elderly couple, dissolution marriage, and so on. However, this paper focuses only on queer representation on Indian OTT platforms. The series portrays two different aspects of Indian Society. The first one is the marital struggle of Tara Khanna, and another one is the identity struggle of Karan Mehta, who belongs to and supports the LGBTQIA community. The series showcases the timeline from the period when gay relationships or same-sex relations were illegal as a part of Section 377 by the Honourable Supreme Court of India. In the series 'Made in Heaven', the directors made two major characters that belong to the LGBTQIA community, one Karan Mehra and the Landlord of Karan Mehra. Both the characters are secretive about their orientations. However, Karan tries to keep his "Gayness" and finds his partners to fulfill his emotional, physical, and psychological needs. Karan struggles to hide his gender orientation at the beginning of the series. Later, he becomes vocal about his identity and convinces society about the acceptance of the LGBTQ community. This series showcased the era when the Indian Penal Code - Section 377 (IPC) was illegal and stated against nature. Even in the series, the director portrays gay affection to Karan publicly and is arrested for the same.

Objectives

The social implication of queer in the Indian OTT media is a less researched area. After prolonged starvation of the

positive queer representation in the Indian OTT media, the audiences are experiencing a realistic, honest narrative of queerness in the complex society. The audience perception of queer, especially as portrayed in OTT media, is also a less researched area. The paper intends to research the various aspects of the same based on a selected case.

- To understand the portrayal of queer in the web series "Made in Heaven."
- To study the scope of queer representation in the Indian OTT Platforms
- To analyze the perception of viewers towards queer representation in Indian OTT media.

Methodology

This paper studies gender representation on OTT platforms and its impact on audience sentiment. The qualitative method used to analyze the data is sentiment analysis. Sentiment analysis is an opinion-mining computational process that determines and extracts the emotional note of the content. It widely examines the audience's positive or negative sentiment in user-generated content. It helps to understand the content satisfaction ratio of the audience, point out the areas of improvement, and identify the specific areas of attention. Sentiment analysis in user comments, reviews, or feedback can provide comprehensive insights into the overall user experience. Positive sentiment describes the success of the content, and negative sentiments reveal the acceptance ratio and areas of improvement and contribute more to a user-centric approach. The predominant objective of the sentiment analysis is to classify the categories of the content, for example, positive, negative, or neutral.

The research paper employed a content analysis method based on the text used in the review comments; the machine language (ML) calculates the text strength as the cumulative value is 0.0 to 0.3 is negative, 0.4 to 0.6 is neutral, and 0.7 to 1.0 is positive strength. The "Made in Heaven (2019)" user review data was retrieved from the IMDb Database. It contains 240 review comments about the series. The retrieved data was analyzed using the Microsoft Azure Machine Learning Studio application. The data was analyzed using Microsoft Azure Machine Learning Studio to determine whether the users were given positive, negative, and neutral review comments to the series based on the text they had already given.

Results and Discussion

The representation of queer in the Indian OTT in web series has become progressively nuanced and diverse in a contemporary media society. While earlier depictions of queer portrayal were often limited to stereotypes and caricatures, modern web series have taken a more complex approach to exploring the experiences and identities of LGBTQIA+ individuals in more depth.

This more diverse and authentic representation of queer characters helps to increase the visibility and understanding of LGBTQIA+ individuals while challenging harmful stereotypes and biases. This has resulted in more visibility and representation for the LGBTQ+ community in terms of content consumption by the audience.

The OTT audience is seeking a realistic approach in terms of choosing the platforms. As a result, OTT platforms are competing with each other to produce relatable, contemporary content. The age of content that reflects the experiences of queer individuals is one of the most consumed content on OTT platforms. The success of shows such as "Orange is the New Black," "Pose," and "Sex Education" has proven that there is a significant demand for diverse stories that represent all members of society, including the LGBTQ+ community.

Amazon web series "Made in Heaven" received mixed comments on the IMDb website. We segregated all the views into positive and negative comments. In the comment section, the audience identified the social relevance of the web series. Queerness is a socially relevant topic and taboo too. The progressive modern society rejects understanding the physiological and emotional situations of the LGBTQIA+ community. Contemporary filmmakers are trying to stand with their taboo topics. It is still impossible to break the chains of social stigma. Discrimination in society against LGBTQIA+ is prominent. The dominance of heterosexuals in the so-called "NORMAL" society made this community insecure and violent. The reason for the insecurity is to accept them for who they are. Due to the social stigma, they are not freely revealing their identity. This type of media content can break the "NORMAL" gender identity theory. Online media successfully bridged the gap between the common and the uncommon as it pushed the boundaries of traditional Indian media content.

Based on the retrieved information from the IMDb Database, out of 240 review comments, more than half of the audience (59.16%) are positive towards the series from the text strength, 29.58% have negative comments towards the text strength, and 11.26% comments are neutral toward the series, as shown in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Figure 2 shows that each review comment sentiment is depicted as a circle positioned by sentiment, an estimate of the emotion contained in the text. Unpleasant comments are drawn as blue circles on the left, and pleasant comments are drawn as green circles on the right. Sedate comments are drawn as darker circles on the bottom, and active comments as brighter circles on the top. From the 240 retrieved data, 38 scored less than 0.12 based on the text summarisation they used in their review comments, which means it must be investigated with the user; the other comments have some effect on the series.

Queer representation in Indian OTT platforms is inclining toward the positive shift in the entertainment industry's

Table 1: Statistical data of viewer comments on the "Made in Heaven" web series

Review comments	Count of Score	Percentage (%)	Sum of Score	Average of Score
Negative	71	29.58	11.14142099	0.156921422
Neutral	27	11.26	14.62872812	0.541804745
Positive	142	59.16	110.0006942	0.774652776
Grand Total	240	100	135.7708433	0.565711847

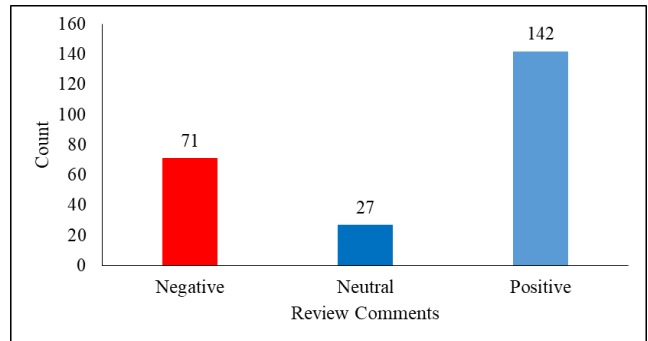


Figure 1: Viewer comments on the web series of "Made in Heaven"

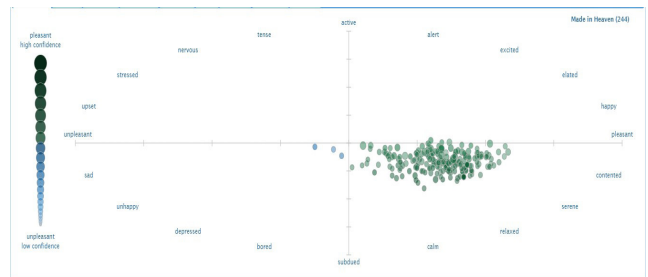


Figure 2: Sentimental analysis

narrative. It is rare to see India's queer community get mainstream media coverage. Their representation in the Indian media is restricted, stereotypical, and sometimes missing. However, with the advent of streaming platforms, there has been a growing acceptance and understanding of the diverse realities of queer lives. OTT platforms are producing content focusing on the queer communities, their rising and downfalls. In such cases, queer people can come forward as actors, writers, and directors for authentic essence. However, the social acceptance of the queer community through OTT platforms is still in a dilemma. Filmmakers are trying to evolve the acceptance pattern by portraying queer identities and relationships by keeping stereotypes aside. The inclusive and diverse queer representation in the OTT platforms has the potential to rewire the socialization process by understanding the need to promote queer identities. This paper's acceptance ratio is lower, though 59.16% of people accepted 'Made in Heaven' as socially relatable content.

However, the negative comments are noticeably controversial. The audience labeled 'Made in Heaven'

Table 2: Positive and negative observations

Sl. No.	Positives	Negatives
1	Social relevance (killing, betrayal, the gold diggers, drug addiction, homosexuality)	Un-relatable, It appears that problems of homosexuality, infidelity, and vulgar displays of wealth perch the higher echelons of society.
2	Social stigma	
3	Physical, social, and mental abuse/discrimination	Cheesy and gimmicking
4	Pushed the boundaries of Indian traditional media content	
5	No sugar-coated, completely, realistic approach	Limited Cultural perspectives
6	Creative	Mocking cultural sensitivity
7	Artistic	No reality
8	Intense	Hypo-critical virtue
9	Underrated	Cultural bias
10	Intriguing yet non-depressing, complexity.	Feminism
11	The show's 'USP' is definitely the writing. Though I don't think it has a perfect narrative structure, it is intriguing nonetheless. The show starts with a kind of "anthology," marriage drama, with very little Prior context about the bride and groom.	Unrequired queer element
12	Social taboo	Imbalanced story
13	Educational	OVERRATED
14	Irresistible, delicate, beautiful portrayal of Indian marriages and parallel subtle homosexuality.	Idiotic screenplay

as unrelatable content (Table 2). According to the IMDb website, the viewers expressed that the storyline mocked cultural sensitivity. 'Culture' defines social behavior, including habits and beliefs. The Kamasutra - classic texts of India described and prescribed 'queer' sexual practices such as 'auparishtaka' or mouth congress. One of the most significant epics in Hinduism – The Mahabharata, has several examples of same-sex 'attachment' (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000). The queerness is mentioned in Hinduism, Perso-Arabic Tradition, and Sufism. From examples, we can understand that the series is not playing or mocking any cultures. The series is an excellent portrayal of gender identity. The series is a relevant example of social change and acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community. This transition can be defined as the 'New Normal'.

Conclusion

Diversity is one of the relevant components of viewership of media content. The audience's active participation in the media content evolves the diversity concept. After introducing the OTT platforms, the audience community became more inclined toward this new media. However, the evolution of OTT media content is prominent. This diverse nature can make a uniform statement on their response to OTT content. The OTT is a fast-growing media market. In terms of making a profit, the producing contents are well-

researched and not sugar-coated. The era of sugar-coated melodramatic content has ended. The audience grabs the realistic yet non-depressing complex content. Queer content is sensible, delicate content which makes the viewers think beyond traditional media content. The web series 'Made in Heaven' portrays the beauty of Indian marriages and parallelly showcases 'Homosexuality'. In 2018, the Supreme Court of India made a historic decision by repealing Section 377 of the IPC. It also observed that "sexual orientation is an essential attribute of privacy". LGBTQIA+ received equal constitutional rights but continued with the gender crisis.

The impact of film media and web media is vigorous. As an influential platform, this type of social content helps to bring positive change in social perspectives. The advantage of Indian OTT is that they do not have any censor board to monitor their activities. Correspondingly, the production of these taboo topics will strengthen the social infrastructure. The OTT content will eventually change the orthodox society. The contemporary world is vocal about all types of discrimination. The OTT media service dominates the global media market and can push the traditional boundaries of Indian media content. Before the film media, OTT platforms presented queer content without damaging the community's dignity. Moreover, OTT can exemplify a positive setting of sexuality and gender. As complex sexual identity is involved in the study, the primary aim will be to analyze

the content of the OTT platforms through which audiences' perspectives will not be tormented. Here, the OTT media plays a positive role in overcoming the obstacles of this misrepresentation of gender and sexual identity.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to acknowledge the management of Krupanidhi Degree College for encouraging and motivating the faculty toward research work.

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