



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Re-envisioning the mainstream: A study on the acceptance of LGBTQIA+ Protagonists on a Bengali OTT platform

Arunima Dey*, Kankana Ghosh, Debangana Chakrabarti, Mahul Brahma

Abstract

In the past few years, the Indian media industry has witnessed a significant shift in the representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in the Indian OTT platforms. Due to the unforeseen COVID-19 global pandemic, the audience discovered a new way of content consumption and the adoption of OTTs. Indian OTT media paves the way for the acceptance of queer identities on OTT platforms. Web series like *'Hello'* and *'Hello, remember me?'* are a few instances of queer narratives in digital spaces. Indian Media Industry, specifically the OTT media, relied heavily on stereotypical representation of queer characters, which reinforces prejudice. The acceptance of LGBTQIA+ protagonists on the Bengali OTT platform is a core development as this community is deprived and unaccepted in some areas. It represents inclusiveness and acceptance as it helps to shape society and creates empathy towards this community. The present research focuses on analyzing the acceptance of LGBTQIA+ protagonists on the Indian OTT Platform. The current research sheds light on the narratives of a Bengali OTT platform like *Hoichoi* to analyze the portrayal of the LGBTQIA+ community and content acceptance. This research follows a mixed-method approach to evaluate the web series' acceptance level in society through the series portraying the LGBTQIA+ community in *Hoichoi*. This study provides an in-depth insight into the representation of LGBTQIA+ protagonists on Bengali OTT platforms by analyzing the queer narratives.

Keywords: LGBTQIA+, Digital Space, OTT Platforms, Protagonist, Bengali web series.

Introduction

In the current media scenario, the representation of the LGBTQIA+ community has become a topic of both discussion and debate. As the media landscape continues to evolve, particularly with the rise of Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms, it is crucial to examine how these emerging platforms address the portrayal of LGBTQIA+ characters and narratives. (Cao *et al.*, 2022) This research paper focuses on accepting LGBTQIA+ protagonists from the Bengali Film Industry in the context of a Bengali OTT platform. This paper also concentrates on the inductive analysis of the shift in narrative and societal attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ protagonists through the

web series *Hello (Seasons 1, 2 & 3)* and *Hello Remember Me* on the Bengali OTT platform *Hoichoi*. From the existing literature, the complexities surrounding the acceptance of LGBTQIA+ individuals in media are prominent. Studies have highlighted the importance of understanding the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality in media portrayals and the impact of these representations on the identity development and lived experiences of LGBTQIA youth (McInroy & Craig, 2015) (Tinoco-Giraldo & Voorhies, 2020) (Kuo *et al.*, 2020).

The perspectives of the LGBTQIA+ community are well-positioned to analyze the impact of representations on their identities and experiences. There is a prominent rise in the representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in films and web series in international and regional content. As a result, it is arguable that the increased representation of LGBTQIA+ characters, whether accurate or nuanced, has a dramatic impact on society, particularly in terms of acceptance. But there is an indelible disagreement whether it is positive or negative. However, seeing themselves reflected in media, LGBTQIA+ individuals may feel more validated and less isolated, which could potentially improve their mental health outcomes. (Uniyal & Mirza, 2024) In addition, the boom in visibility can reduce discrimination, stigma and disgrace that the community faces but escalate social acceptance and understanding.

NSHM Media School, NSHM College of Management and Technology, Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

***Corresponding Author:** Arunima Dey, NSHM Media School, NSHM College of Management and Technology, Kolkata, West Bengal, India., E-Mail: adey038@gmail.com

How to cite this article: Dey, A., Ghosh, K., Chakrabarti, D., Brahma M. (2025). Re-envisioning the mainstream: A study on the acceptance of LGBTQIA+ Protagonists on a Bengali OTT platform. The Scientific Temper, 16(4):4039-4047.

Doi: 10.58414/SCIENTIFICTEMPER.2025.16.4.05

Source of support: Nil

Conflict of interest: None.

Indian cinema has long influenced societal dialogues on human rights, including LGBTQIA+ issues. Historically, films perpetuated stereotypes of queer identities; however, this has evolved into more nuanced portrayals, especially following the Supreme Court's 2018 decision decriminalizing homosexuality. Films such as *Pink* and *Article 15* have already sparked conversations on social issues, and the recent denial of conjugal rights to the queer community in the "Supriyo v. Union of India" judgment highlights the ongoing struggle for LGBTQIA+ inclusivity. Cinema remains pivotal in reshaping societal attitudes and advocating for empathy and inclusiveness in India (Pachori, Bhati, & Goyal, 2024).

Research on the LGBTQ+ community has historically focused on attitudes of heterosexual individuals, with limited studies addressing perspectives within the LGBTQ+ population itself. Bergersen, Klar, and Schmitt (2018) address this gap by exploring the impact of intersectionality on political engagement within the LGBTQ+ community. Their findings indicate that individuals at the intersection of multiple minority identities report lower levels of political participation. Additionally, the study reveals that governmental actions targeting out-groups significantly mobilize LGBTQ+ individuals, whereas supportive actions toward their in-group have a comparatively smaller impact.

The representation of LGBTQIA+ individuals in media has undergone significant evolution, reflecting broader societal and legal changes. Historically, LGBTQIA+ portrayals in traditional media were often stereotypical and limited in scope, as highlighted by McInroy and Craig (2017), who emphasize the power of emerging media in offering diverse and meaningful depictions to young LGBTQIA+ audiences.

Johnson (2016) underscores the connection between media representation and mental health within the bisexual community, suggesting that negative portrayals exacerbate stigmas and psychological issues. In India, the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2018 (Section 377) catalyzed a wave of nuanced narratives in OTT platforms, making them an instrumental medium for addressing LGBTQIA+ issues. Vardhan (2020) observes that despite international strides in representing gay characters, Indian audiences still grapple with acceptance.

Studies on specific Indian web series reveal diverse approaches. For example, *Mismatched Season 2* portrays struggles of identity and homophobia faced by its lesbian and bisexual characters, while *His Story* examines the challenges of a gay man reconciling his identity with familial and societal expectations (Jain, 2021). Similarly, *Four More Shots Please* introduces a strong bisexual character whose relationship explores themes of acceptance and mental health, while *Made in Heaven* delves into the duality of privilege and vulnerability in a gay character's life (Trivedi, 2019).

There has long been discussion about how LGBTQIA+ characters are portrayed in popular media, especially in

relation to regional and culturally diverse film industries like Bengali cinema. Bengali media, particularly in the rapidly growing digital realm of OTT platforms, has been slower to embrace and depict LGBTQIA+ protagonists in a nuanced and genuine way despite the notable advancements in the global representation of queer characters (Pradhan,

2021). The purpose of this study is to investigate how viewers view, interact with and react to LGBTQIA+ characters on a Bengali (OTT) platform. Understanding the elements that affect this acceptance—such as cultural norms, societal perspectives on gender and sexual diversity and the changing nature of content consumption in the digital age—is the goal of the study. This study sheds light on some important insights into the changing dynamics of LGBTQIA+ community representation within regional digital content by examining the intersection of media portrayal, audience reception as well as societal attitudes. This study also sheds light on the wider implications for diversity and inclusivity in Bengali entertainment media. Additionally, the acceptance level of the young people considering the portrayal of the mentioned community in Bengali OTT platforms is also analyzed in this study.

Summary of the series

LGBTQIA+ Representation in Hello (Season 1, 2 & 3) and Hello Remember me?

Hello and Hello 2, which is exclusively available on *Hoichoi*, subtly explores LGBTQIA+ themes through the complex relationships between Nandita (played by Raima Sen) and Nina (played by Priyanka Sarkar). The series hints at the fluidity of relationships, moving beyond traditional heteronormative frameworks. Nina's confident and unapologetic demeanor, coupled with Nandita's growing connection to her, offered a nuanced portrayal of queer dynamics. Without resorting to labels, the narrative normalizes such relationships, subtly endorsing LGBTQIA+ inclusivity.

As Nandita investigates the MMS and Nina's role in her husband's life, she begins to form a complex bond with Nina. What initially appears to be an antagonistic relationship shifts into something more intimate and layered. The series explores themes of female desire, agency, and the unspoken emotional connections that transcend traditional definitions of relationships. In *Hello 2*, this subtext is further developed, adding depth to Nandita and Nina's relationship. The sequel delves into the psychological and emotional entanglements between the two women, blurring the lines between obsession, attraction, and companionship. The way Nina's character is portrayed—with her confident, unapologetic demeanor—challenged traditional stereotypes of women in Bengali narratives and added an empowering layer to queer representation. Nandita's growing intrigue and bond with Nina blur the lines between friendship, obsession, and

attraction, suggesting a fluidity in relationships that isn't bound by societal norms. Nina's unapologetic confidence and allure are central to this dynamic, making her character a symbol of empowerment and defiance of conventional stereotypes.

With the addition of new characters that give the plot more nuance, season 3 of the show continues to examine the complex relationships between Nandita, Nina and Ananyo. As they deal with their inner demons and work through the difficulties of their relationships, the protagonists face new difficulties throughout the season. Soumik Chattopadhyay directed each of the twelve episodes in the third season. Recent additions to the cast such as Saheb Bhattacharya and Pamela Bhutoria, have important parts that advance the plot and give the narrative new depth.

The web series *Hello! Remember Me?* is available on *Hoichoi* in Bengali. The story revolves around Isha Saha's character, Malini, a heavily pregnant woman who goes on a mountain retreat with her husband Abir (Sourav Chakraborty) and his whole family. She unexpectedly runs into her ex-girlfriend and former college senior Tori, played by Payel Sarkar, while on this trip. Tori's return disturbs Malini's peaceful existence because she starts to follow her around with the intention of upsetting her and disclosing information about their past. In addition to exposing previously unknown facets of Malini's past, this intrusion poses a threat to the current dynamics of her family. The show explores how unresolved issues can resurface and affect present lives by delving into themes of past relationships, obsession and the complexities of same-sex love. Malini must deal with the difficulties brought on by her past while working to safeguard her family and future as Tori's actions become more and more invasive.

Literature review

LGBTQIA+ characters' reception on Bengali OTT platforms reflects a changing cultural landscape that reflects both conservative and progressive viewpoints. Social stigmas have historically prevented Bengali television and film from featuring explicit LGBTQIA+ themes. However, the rise in popularity of OTT platforms has given creators greater liberty to experiment with a variety of storylines, including those that feature LGBTQIA+ characters (Arya, 2023). Viewers' reactions have been conflicted with younger viewers, especially those in urban areas, are more likely to value and support these stories because they perceive them as necessary and energizing depictions of contemporary humanity (Alday-Mondaca & Lay Lisboa, 2021)

These narratives are frequently seen as crucial to promoting inclusivity and dispelling stereotypes. Nonetheless, conservative groups continue to be doubtful or disapproving, frequently denouncing such representations as being incompatible with Bengali cultural norms. As these

tales continue to spread, they gradually change public opinion and encourage viewers to accept them. Overall, despite both support and opposition, the portrayal of LGBTQIA+ characters on Bengali OTT platforms is helping to bring about a significant cultural shift.

In addition to reflecting broader changes in storytelling and character development, the representation of LGBTQIA+ protagonists on Bengali OTT platforms also reflects the creator's attempts to depict a more realistic range of identities (Pradhan, 2021). Viewers who have previously seen such stories marginalized or oversimplified find resonance in the show's exploration of complex themes of identity, acceptance, love and societal pressures through these characters. Now that stereotypes have been abandoned in favor of more realistic portrayals of characters' struggles, goals and journeys, characters are shown with more depth. In certain instances, audience reaction has sparked discussions about mental health, family acceptance and social challenges especially since these stories reflect the realities the LGBTQIA+ community faces in real life (Stevens, 2020). Many viewers applaud this inclusivity, but these stories also encounter obstacles like social media criticism and censorship demands. Notwithstanding these challenges, the growing interest in and openness toward such content among Bengali audiences suggests a gradual but noticeable shift in societal perceptions of LGBTQIA+ representation.

Hoichoi, a Bengali OTT platform, has emerged as a significant player in experimenting with diverse storylines incorporating LGBTQIA+ themes. Research on Bengali OTT content points to a trend of subtle yet symbolic inclusion of queer identities, with an emphasis on character-driven narratives that evoke empathy and understanding (Chakraborty, 2021). For instance, *Hoichoi's* shows sometimes portray LGBTQIA+ relationships in restrained or symbolic ways, providing visibility without fully confronting social taboos (Sen, 2023).

Regional OTT platforms face unique challenges, especially in conservative societies where LGBTQIA+ issues remain sensitive (Sinha, 2021). In *Hoichoi's* case, the cultural specificity of Bengali audiences requires storytelling that resonates with Bengali identity while delicately addressing sexuality and gender diversity. Scholars suggest that *Hoichoi's* approach illustrates a "slow cultural shift" wherein the portrayal of queer protagonists gradually normalizes their presence in mainstream Bengali narratives without shocking traditional sensibilities (Mukherjee, 2023).

Studies on OTT platforms' impact on media narratives suggest that streaming services like *Hoichoi* contribute to expanding gender and sexuality portrayals (Ramachandran, 2019). Scholars argue that while OTT platforms have opened new spaces for LGBTQIA+ expression, regional platforms like *Hoichoi* adapt these representations to resonate within

cultural contexts, reflecting the possibilities and limits of streaming media's progressive reach (Prakash, 2021). This supports the notion that streaming services can re-envision the mainstream by positioning LGBTQIA+ protagonists as part of larger, culturally relatable stories.

The concept of "the closet" has long been a central metaphor in queer studies, symbolizing the tension between visibility and concealment in LGBTQIA+ lives. Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) outlines how coming out disrupts heteronormative frameworks, challenging societal norms that invisibly sustain heterosexual privilege. In the context of Bangladesh, where conservative sociocultural values dominate, the notion of "coming out" acquires complex meanings shaped by intersections of class, gender, and mobility. This study draws on Sedgwick's foundational ideas while interrogating their applicability in non-Western contexts. Research on queer identities in the Global South emphasizes how local socio-political landscapes influence queer lives differently than in Western contexts. Boellstorff (2005) and Manalansan (2006) argue that the globalization of LGBTQIA+ discourses often overlooks cultural specificities, leading to tensions between global queer narratives and localized practices. This study situates itself within this discourse by examining how Bangladeshi queer women negotiate their identities amidst globalized notions of queerness and local expectations of womanhood and development. They reflect the interplay between personal narratives and social expectations. Goffman's (1963) concept of "self-presentation" is relevant here, as it explores how individuals curate their identities in different social contexts. For queer Bangladeshi women, disclosures are shaped by cultural taboos, familial pressures, and societal norms, often resulting in ambiguous kinship relations and contested community ties. Popular culture and online media play significant roles in shaping and representing queer identities. While Western queer representation often emphasizes individual liberation through coming out, local representations in Bangladesh remain inadequate, as reflected in participants' critiques. Gray (2009) and Dhoest & Simons (2012) underscore the importance of diverse media portrayals for fostering acceptance and visibility. This study extends their insights by exploring how Bangladeshi queer women engage with and critique popular culture as part of their identity formation.

The intersectionality of class, mobility, and generational shifts further complicates queer identities. Crenshaw's (1991) framework on intersectionality is pivotal in understanding how these factors mediate access to visibility and acceptance. For example, younger queer Bangladeshi women with greater social and geographical mobility may find more avenues for self-expression than those rooted in conservative, rural settings. This study examines how such intersections influence participants' perceptions

of queerness and their strategies for navigating societal constraints. The narrative of "development" in Dhaka, as described in the field notes, serves as both a metaphor and a lived reality. The constant construction, excess, and chaos of urban life reflect broader national discourses on progress and modernity. Hage's (2003) notion of "decay" as a byproduct of abundance resonates with participants' experiences of disorientation and resilience. This study bridges these macro-level discourses with micro-level lived experiences to analyze how urban transformations intersect with queer identities.

The trajectory of Indian queer cinema can be understood through its evolution into what Aparna Lakshmi and Chrissie Gracelyn David term "Second Post-377 Indian Queer Cinema." This genre serves as a cultural and cinematic response to the decriminalization of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) on September 6, 2018. This section, a colonial-era anti-sodomy law, was struck down by the Supreme Court of India, marking a historic victory for LGBTQIA+ rights (*Navtej Johar & Ors. vs. Union of India*). This legal milestone catalyzed a new wave of Indian queer cinema that redefined how LGBTQIA+ lives and stories are represented on screen.

Indian queer cinema emerged as an act of resistance against reductive and often damaging portrayals of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Early films, such as *Badnam Basti* (Prem Kapoor, 1971), and controversial works like Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1992), laid the groundwork for conversations around queer identity and representation (Lakshmi & David, 2021). However, these early representations were often characterized by stereotyping, hyper-sexualization, and marginalization, which failed to capture the complexities of queer existence (Russo, 1981). Bengali filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh's seminal queer trilogy—*Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010), *Memories in March* (2010), and *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012)—is central to understanding the rise of regional queer cinema. Ghosh's work humanized queer characters,

emphasizing inclusivity and authenticity while pioneering themes of gender fluidity and alternate sexuality (Lakshmi & David, 2021). Her use of gender-neutral pronouns in scholarship underscores the fluidity of her identity and work, reflecting a deeper engagement with queer theory and representation (Roy, 2020). The post-2018 era ushered in a vibrant wave of Indian queer films that explored diverse narratives and issues, including same-sex desire, societal homophobia, and familial rejection. Films such as *Evening Shadows* (2018), *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019), *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020), and *Badhaai Do* (2022) successfully engaged mainstream audiences and catalyzed public discourse regarding queer identities in India (Lakshmi & David, 2021). Nonetheless, these cinematic works frequently contended with obstacles, including censorship, apprehension of alienating heterosexual viewers, and the predominance of cisgender casting (Roy, 2020).

While Bollywood often encountered these constraints, regional queer cinema progressed through inventive narrative techniques and international outreach methodologies. For example, Bengali queer cinema emerged as a culturally significant and influential medium. The legacy of Ghosh motivated filmmakers such as Kaushik Ganguly and Ram Kamal Mukherjee to produce films like *Nagarkirtan* (2019) and *Brihonnola* (2018), which effectively transcended linguistic limitations via subtitling, dubbing, and digital streaming platforms (Lakshmi & David, 2021) in a similar vein, South Indian queer films such as *Moothon* (2019) and *Super Deluxe* (2019) have effectively depicted intricate, intersectional queer narratives that have been commended for their authenticity and profundity. Queer cinema transcends mere artistic expression; it serves as a medium of celluloid activism. The collaborative storytelling inherent in these films has engendered enhanced LGBTQIA+ visibility, social acceptance, and legal consciousness. Film festivals, scholarly discourse, and digital platforms have further magnified these narratives, thereby contributing to a broader cultural transformation towards queer inclusivity (Bakshi & Dasgupta, 2020).

Notwithstanding the advancements made, Indian queer cinema continues to encounter challenges such as inadequate funding for independent films, a scarcity of queer representation within production teams, and a sluggish trajectory of societal acceptance. Nevertheless, the second post-377 wave has established a robust foundation for future filmmakers to challenge conventions and persist in the pursuit of representation and equality.

Research Gap

Firstly, there exists a significant deficiency in scholarly investigations pertaining to the societal ramifications of LGBTQIA+ representation within Bengali OTT platforms. The research proposed herein aims to address the substantial lacunae in understanding the implications of OTT media content on its audience, particularly in relation to the representation of LGBTQIA+ individuals and the ensuing social acceptance. Furthermore, this inquiry aspires to potentially bridge the existing gaps in knowledge regarding societal perceptions of the LGBTQIA+ community as portrayed on OTT platforms.

According to the repressive hypothesis theory, it is evident that prevailing societal norms predominantly constrain the content associated with the LGBTQIA+ community on Bengali OTT platforms. The fact of acceptance is still not shown. It's based on family drama and family restrictions. The concept of thinking freedom or acceptance is limited and hardly shown. Content like *Hello*, *hello 2* revolves around the storyline of a girl being married to a man and her old lover, who happens to be a girl, comes back to her life and how everyone sees that as a shame for two women to be in love and how now the lead is restricting her thought process because of societal norms.

Theoretical framework

Reception theory

Stuart Hall's Reception theory emphasizes that media texts can be encoded with meanings by creators and decoded by audiences in various ways. This is important for this research as it enables the researcher to investigate how Bengali OTT content houses produce and read queer cultures. According to Hall, some audiences may not enter the reception room with the same definitions as those in the codes; the interpretations are therefore negotiated based on the audience's experiences and cultural backgrounds (Briandana & Azmawati, 2020). This theory can be applied to understand how Bengali viewers might accept or challenge LGBTQIA+ protagonists in mainstream narratives. Some viewers may completely reject the encoded messages due to their beliefs or cultural norms. In the context of this research, this can help identify segments of the audience that resist LGBTQIA+ representation, highlighting societal barriers (Wahyono, Wirasti & Ratmono, 2020). Considering this theory, it can be stated that Bengali viewers can comprehend how they might embrace or reject LGBTQIA+ heroes in popular stories. Because of their cultural norms or beliefs, some viewers might reject the encoded messages outright. This highlights societal barriers and can assist in identifying audience segments that oppose LGBTQIA+ representation in the context of this study. It is also beneficial to discuss how audiences might embrace and concur with the prevailing messages in media texts. Examining this can assist in determining whether LGBTQIA+ characters are being accepted in Bengali OTT content mainstream narratives.

Gender Acceptance and Social Role Theory

The crucial agenda of social role theory is to explain how societal norms influence acceptance. It clarifies why the resistance may be to question conventional gender roles. Social norms can be upset, and resistance can result when people depart from deeply rooted expectations related to their perceived gender. Denis McQuail (2000) holds the media responsible for influencing ideas and ideals as well as for shedding light and encouraging systematic exposure. The audience or consumers' awareness of LGBTQIA+ characters in mainstream media has grown in the recent digital era. Digital platforms are becoming more and more prevalent in the media consumption landscape. The representation of the LGBTQIA+ community as other genders or not is important because it can act as a catalyst for acceptance. The representation of LGBTQIA+ characters on Bengali OTT platforms is the main topic of this literature review. It has been observed that Indian OTT platforms and mainstream media focus on LGBTQIA+-related content. This type of steady shift is visible in the regional OTT platforms. The Indian OTT landscape is diverse, and there are also positive

examples of progressive gender representation. The existing literature revealed that the visibility of LGBTQIA+ content is complex and influences sociocultural thoughts. Indian OTT media exhibits a complex and evolving representation of gender roles. While it provides a platform for diverse narratives, there are concerns regarding the persistence of gender stereotypes and the emergence of hate speech. (Sharma, 2021)

It is becoming an integral part of marketing dynamics, too. While queer-chic and gay-friendly narratives have become more commonplace, the representations tend to be predominantly white, middle-aged, middle-class, and heterosexual-leaning. This raises questions about the extent to which these portrayals accurately reflect the diverse experiences and intersectional identities within the LGBTQIA+ community. (Uniyal & Mirza, 2024) Highlights how OTT platforms are creating new narratives around gender by showcasing diverse stories.

In the context of India, research on the mental health and well-being of LGBTQIA+ individuals has highlighted the unique challenges faced by this community, including stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion. (Wandrekar & Nigudkar, 2020) The limited representation of LGBTQIA+ characters in Indian mainstream media, particularly in regional language content, further contributes to the marginalization of these individuals. (Shugart, 2003)

Interestingly, the rise of digital platforms, such as OTT services, has created new opportunities for the representation of LGBTQIA+ characters in Indian media. The dominant heteronormative discourse in mainstream media has been challenged by the emergence of queer narratives on these platforms. Still, more research is needed to determine how well these portrayals capture the variety of experiences of the Bengali LGBTQIA+ community and how widely accepted they are. Investigating. Both praise and criticism have been leveled at the growing presence of LGBTQIA+ characters in popular media. However, some academics warn that the commercialization of queer culture can result in problematic assimilation into the mainstream, while others contend that these representations facilitate a sense of queer resistance and subversion of heteronormative norms (Dhaenens, 2014). Cultural, social and political factors may interact in a complex way to influence the acceptance of LGBTQIA+ characters on Bengali OTT platforms. One possible tool for political and social commentary in online LGBTQIA+ participatory cultures is humor (Shrodes, 2020). For example, the semiotic tools used by producers of LGBTQ+ reaction videos may provide information about how marginalized groups negotiate and challenge prevailing narratives. However, LGBTQIA+ people face unique difficulties in their online communities as they balance the need for visibility with the possibility of harassment or backlash. In summary, the literature currently in publication emphasizes the

complexities of LGBTQIA+ representation in popular media, especially when considering the ecosystem of Bengali OTT platforms. Additionally, the way that particular LGBTQIA+ subgroups are portrayed, along with the symbolism and narratives that go along with it, can disclose underlying marketing and sociocultural ideologies. As the gay media landscape continues to evolve, it is crucial to examine how the identity categories of sexuality, gender, race, and class intersect in the portrayal of LGBTQIA+ characters.

Methodology

This paper studies the acceptance of LGBTQIA+ Protagonists on a Bengali OTT Platform and a new leaf in content preference. The qualitative methods used to analyze the data are semi-structured interviews and thematic content analysis.

The thematic content analysis is an inductive method of qualitative research that includes the following steps: a. Familiarization, b. Coding c. Generating themes d. Reviewing themes, e. Defining and naming themes f. Write-up. This analysis helps to find out the current theme pattern or structure in the data. The semi-structured interview is a qualitative method of data collection that is mostly used in the social sciences. This is the combination of structured and unstructured interviews. In this method, the questions are open, prearranged and pre-determined, with an opportunity for the interviewer to explore themes or responses further. It widely examines the opportunities for the interviewer and interviewee to discuss the topic and free-flow the information.

The study is based on the following objectives, as also depicted in Figure 1:

1. To evaluate the portrayal of the LGBTQIA+ community in OTT media with regard to social role theory
2. To analyze the audience reception and acceptance of LGBTQIA+ protagonists in the Bengali OTT platform
3. To analyze the impact of constrained societal acceptance shown in the OTT media of LGBTQIA+ protagonists

Findings and Discussion

OBJECTIVE 1: To evaluate the portrayal of the LGBTQIA+ community in OTT media with regard to social role theory

In the OTT environment, the theory provides a vivid insight into the portrayal of LGBTQIA+ narratives in the OTT media.

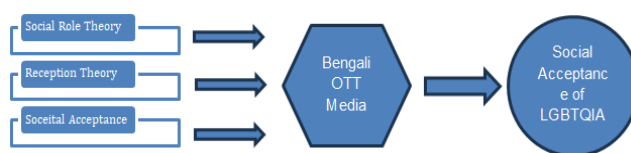


Figure1: Research Flow depicting the relationship of acceptance of LGBTQIA+ protagonist on the Bengali OTT platforms

It reveals either they defy or abide by conventional rules. According to the Social Role Theory, the people of the society grasp the social roles by cultural norms. As a result, it often results in typecasting and stereotyping. The analysis of Hello and Hello Remember Me on the Bengali OTT platform “Hoichoi” reveals a mixed pattern. It has been observed that the progressive narratives attempt to deconstruct the complex gender roles. The protagonists from the series have portrayed the complex LGBTQIA+ roles with similar heterosexual emotions, challenges and aspirations. Shows like Hello and Hello Remember Me have featured LGBTQIA+ protagonists breaking the tokenistic representation that is often seen in mainstream media. However, many representations still fall into the stereotypical depictions. The oversimplifying emotional

dilemma of lesbians, gay men with excessive effeminacy, and stacy transgender characters are a few examples of dominant narratives that align with the culturally ingrained stereotypes described by social role theory. This perpetuation of stereotypes, albeit in subtler forms, reinforces societal expectations rather than challenging them. However, the portrayal of the LGBTQIA + individual as “other” or “exotic” puts indelible ink on their identity, and it remains a concern in the depiction on the screen. Some shows on the OTT media strive to “normalize” these characters and portray inclusivity instead of their hardships from the larger social fabric. Even if these depictions raise awareness, they could unintentionally perpetuate the idea that LGBTQIA+ identities are abnormal.

However, the social role theory does not acknowledge these roles as static. The evolution of society is associated with the acceptance of different genders. The increased visibility and advocacy can lead to shifts in these norms, fostering greater acceptance of gender diversity.

OBJECTIVE 2: To analyse the audience reception and acceptance of LGBTQIA+ protagonists in Bengali OTT platform

It has been observed that in the Bengali OTT platforms, the portrayal of LGBTQIA+ protagonists has gradually shifted from marginalization to more central and multi-dimensional roles. Early portrayals often relegated queer characters to comic relief or tragedy, but recent narratives attempt to highlight their journeys, societal struggles, acceptance and achievements. In order to understand the portrayal of the LGBTQIA+ community in the Bengali OTT platform, some codes have been developed based on the interview analysis. They are a. Social Responsibility, b. Resistance c. Media representation d. Struggle e. Personal belief. The LGBTQIA+ community’s visibility and representation on Bengali OTT platforms has been steadily increasing, which is indicative of the general cultural movement in favor of diversity and inclusivity in media. While queer characters were frequently marginalized or stereotyped in earlier stories,

modern Bengali web series and movies are increasingly providing complex and genuine representations. LGBTQIA+ themes are now being explored on platforms like Hoichoi, frequently integrating them into larger plots that center on relationships, love and individual identity. The goal of these stories is to break down stereotypes and show queer people as completely complex characters rather than as parodies or incidental plot points. However, problems still exist because conservative viewers sometimes react negatively to these depictions, which are sometimes limited to specialized audiences. Nonetheless, the increasing visibility of LGBTQIA+ stories on Bengali OTT platforms represents an important step in promoting representation acceptance and understanding in local media. This visibility is evidence of the ability of digital media to magnify underrepresented voices in addition to reflecting shifting societal attitudes. Audience reception plays a critical role in understanding societal attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ representation. Semi-structured interviews among the creators of Hello (Seasons 1, 2 & 3) and Hello Remember Me and academicians (focusing on Sociology, Gender Studies and Social work) reveal evolving perspectives of the community. The positive acceptance of urban audiences on LGBTQIA+ tales is evident, especially among young audiences. Consequently, the audiences appreciate the queer narratives in the mainstream media as a part of the inclusion of diverse stories to normalize queer identities. However, there has been a prominent conflict between urban and rural audiences on the content consumption of LGBTQIA+ narratives. The semi-urban and rural audiences have mixed approaches regarding the content of queer narratives. Citing cultural incongruities and discomfort with the subject matter, older audiences in the same places show opposition to LGBTQIA+ content. In contrast, partial acceptability of queer narratives has been indicated by numerous audiences from the same demographic. They are particularly focusing on the struggle of the community. But they have shown extreme rejection of overt romantic and sexual content.

However, acceptance is not universal. Acceptance level is higher for well-portrayed characters no matter from which gender or community they represent, compared to those that appear tokenistic or overly politicized. While conducting the interviews, a couple of Bengali films from the interviewees’ side have popped up which received immense appreciation and acceptance though they have showcased LGBTQIA+ narratives. Movies like *Nagarkirtan*, *Memories in March*, *Arekti Premer Golpo*, and *Chitrangoda* describe the balancing representation with societal sensitivities.

OBJECTIVE 3: To analyze the impact of constrained societal acceptance shown in the OTT media of LGBTQIA+ protagonists

The societal norms and the acceptance of LGBTQIA+ content on OTT platforms are constantly changing. Social acceptance

of queer identities frequently lags behind the emergence of progressive narratives about them. LGBTQIA+ themes in popular entertainment are still being challenged by deeply ingrained cultural and traditional values in society. This conflict leads to a dichotomy in which younger urban audiences who are exposed to global viewpoints exhibit more openness while older, more conservative viewers oppose such material. OTT platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar, and Hoichoi carefully examine these stories while striking a balance between artistic freedom and cultural sensibilities. Even though the value of diverse representation is becoming more widely acknowledged, stigma, stereotypes and ignorance frequently prevent acceptance. The constant narrative that humanizes queer experiences and questions established conventions is essential for wider social acceptance. These representations have the potential to promote discussion empathy and a change in public perceptions over time, opening the door for more inclusive regional media.

The depiction of the constrained societal acceptance of LGBTQIA+ on OTT media reflects their struggles and serves as a mirror and a catalyst for societal change. It showcased familial rejection, workplace harassment, societal discrimination and internalized homophobia, which resonates deeply with LGBTQIA+ viewers who face similar challenges in their daily lives. However, one significant impact can be normalizing the discussions and giving space for LGBTQIA+ narratives on the OTT platforms. OTT shows like *Hello* and *Hello Remember Me* encourage viewers to confront their biases and consider the lived realities of queer individuals. The depiction of gradual acceptance within familial and social structures, as seen in these shows, provides a hopeful yet realistic roadmap for societal change. However, the emphasis on constrained acceptance can also have unintended consequences. For some viewers, it reinforces the idea that LGBTQIA+ individuals must endure prolonged struggles to “earn” their place in society. This narrative, while reflective of reality, risks perpetuating the notion that queer identities are inherently contentious and require justification.

Conclusion

Social opposition to LGBTQIA+ representation in media content on Bengali over-the-top (OTT) platforms such as *Hoichoi* underscores the persistent societal and cultural obstacles to diversity acceptance. These stories frequently encounter criticism and backlash from conservative segments of society despite creators’ best efforts to incorporate genuine queer narratives. There is opposition to the normalization of LGBTQIA+ themes in popular entertainment since many viewers view such material as an insult to traditional values. Social norms that stigmatize non-heteronormative identities, ignorance and deeply rooted prejudices are the main causes of this opposition. Therefore,

to avoid controversy, producers and creators usually tone down queer themes to balance artistic expression with commercial viability. Although a younger urban audience has demonstrated a greater willingness to accept these narratives, the visibility and normalization of LGBTQIA+

identities in Bengali OTT content are still hampered by broader societal resistance. To overcome this resistance, persistent efforts in dialogue education and the regular presentation of inclusive narratives are needed. The findings of this research underscore a complex triangle between OTT representation, societal acceptance attitudes and audience reception. The Indian OTT content producers especially the Bengali OTT platforms, have taken courageous steps in representing LGBTQIA+ narratives. Though their portrayal often mirrors the constraints of societal acceptance. To incorporate meaningful change, creators, producers and content creators must push for nuanced and inclusive storytelling. This will not be a strategy for the OTT media to reshape the society. But it will open a new path for LGBTQIA+ identities to pave the way for the future and to be celebrated rather than contested.

The evolution of OTT Media has earned the position of presenting controversial social topics to the audience. This vast capacity has eternized the acceptance in mainstream traditional society. In addition, the OTT media demonstrated the layers of gender complications in society before any other media. Even if mainstream Bengali viewers are still hesitant to completely embrace LGBTQIA+ protagonists, web series like *Hello* and *Hello Remember Me* and movies that explore complex queer experiences are positive steps. To normalize LGBTQIA+ identities and promote inclusivity, the OTT media can play an exceptional role by providing genuine and compassionate representations of the community.

Web series like *Hello* and *Hello Remember Me* and films exploring nuanced queer experiences are steps in the right direction, although mainstream audiences in Bengal still demonstrate hesitation in fully embracing LGBTQIA+ protagonists. Consistently offering authentic and empathetic portrayals can influence attitudes positively, helping normalize queer identities and fostering a more inclusive society.

Scope for Further Research

In a further study, the creators of the entertainment industry may include LGBTQIA+ community individuals to play queer roles or any gender roles. In the series *Made in Heaven Season 2*, the creator incorporated the character of Meher, played by Trinetra Halder Gummaraju, a trans woman in real life. She has been shown as an educated transgender wedding planner in the series, shaken up society by her involvement in the character. Without any formal acting lessons, she played the character with zeal. This type of societal inclusion can open a new era in the field of research.

References

- Alday-Mondaca, C., & Lay-Lisboa, S. (2021). The impact of internalized stigma on LGBT parenting and the importance of health care structures: A qualitative study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(10), 5373. Arya, P. (2023). Media Portrayal of Same-Sex Love: A Comparative Analysis between Cinema and OTT Platforms. *The Text*, 5(2).
- Bakshi, K., & Dasgupta, R. K. (2020). *Queer Studies in India: Toward a Rainbow Future*. Routledge.
- Banerjee, A. (2022). "Exploring LGBTQ Representation in Bengali OTT Content: A Case Study of Hoichoi." *Journal of South Asian Media Studies*, 14(2), 45-60. Bergersen, M., Klar, S., & Schmitt, E. (2018). Intersectionality and Engagement among the LGBTQ+ Community. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 196-219.
- Boellstorff, T. (2005). *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia*. Princeton University Press.
- Briandana, R., & Azmawati, A. A. (2020). New media audience and gender perspective: A reception analysis of millennials interpretation. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research*, 6(1), 58-63.
- Cao, S., Geng, M., Ou, L., & Pan, R. (2022, January 1). Research on the Image Construction of LGBT Groups from Different Media Perspectives. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.220704.092>
- Chakraborty, S. (2021). "Cultural Boundaries and Digital Storytelling in Bengal's OTT Landscape." *Asian Screen Studies*, 9(3), 32-49.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*.
- Dhaenens, F. (2014, April 22). Articulations of queer resistance on the small screen. *Taylor & Francis*, 28(4), 520-531. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2014.907869> Dhoest, A., & Simons, N. (2012). "Questioning Queer Audiences: Exploring Diversity in Lesbian and Gay Men's Media Uses." *Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*. Eagly, A. H., & Wood, W. (2012, October 11). *Social Role Theory*. SAGE Publishing, undefined(undefined), 458-476.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Prentice-Hall. Gray, M. L. (2009). *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*. NYU Press.
- Hage, G. (2003). *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society*. Pluto Press.
- Jain, A. (2021). His Storyy teaser: Of romance, secrets and lies. *The Indian Express*. Johnson, H. J. (2016). Bisexuality, Mental Health, and Media Representation. *Journal of Bisexuality*.
- Lakshmi, A., & David, C. G. (2021). "The Second Post-377 Indian Queer Cinema: The Second Dawn of Indian Rainbow Cinema." *Webology*, 18(3), 2281-2294. Manalansan, M. F. (2006). "Queer Intersections: Sexuality and Gender in Migration Studies." *International Migration Review*.
- McInroy, L. B., & Craig, S. L. (2015, April 9). Transgender Representation in Offline and Online Media: LGBTQ Youth Perspectives. *Taylor & Francis*, 25(6), 606-617. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2014.995392>
- McInroy, L. B., & Craig, S. L. (2017). Perspectives of LGBTQ emerging adults on the depiction and impact of LGBTQ media representation. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(1), 32-46.
- Mukherjee, R. (2023). "The Cultural Politics of Queer Representation in Bengali OTT Platforms." *South Asian Screen Studies*, 7(1), 25-40.
- Navtej Johar & Ors. vs. Union of India, Supreme Court of India Judgment, September 6 2018.
- Pachori, A., Bhati, A., & Goyal, P. (2024). Tracing the Trajectory of Human Rights of LGBTQIA+ in Indian Cinema: From Celluloid to OTTs. In *Indian Cinema and Human Rights: An Intersectional Tale* (pp. 89-113). Springer.
- Pradhan, P. (2021). LGBTQ Representation in Amazon Prime's 'Made in Heaven': An Analytical Study. *Pragyaan: Journal of Mass Communication*, 20.
- Prakash, M. (2021). *The Streaming Revolution and India's Evolving Media Landscape*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan.
- Ramachandran, K. (2019). "OTT Platforms and Gender-Sensitive Storytelling in Indian Media." *Journal of New Media Studies*, 13(2), 121-133.
- Roy, B. (2020). "Queer Representations in Indian Cinema: A Study of Post-377 Narratives." *Queer Studies Journal*, 5(2), 29-30.
- Russo, V. (1981). *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*. Harper & Row.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press. Sen, P. (2023). "Digital Media and the Politics of Representation in Contemporary Bengali Series." *Indian Media Journal*, 11(1), 12-25.
- Sharma, K. (2021, November 1). Emerging Gender Role and Hate Speech Representation in Indian web series OTT media Content. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)*, 8(11).
- Shrodes, A. (2020, October 23). Humor as Political Possibility: Critical Media Literacy in LGBTQ+ Participatory Cultures. *Wiley*, 56(4), 855-876. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.328> Shugart, H. A. (2003, January 1). Reinventing Privilege: The New (Gay) Man in Contemporary Popular Media. *Taylor & Francis*, 20(1), 67-91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0739318032000067056>
- Sinha, L. (2021). "The Reception of LGBTQIA+ Narratives in Regional Indian Media." *Journal of Contemporary Indian Culture*, 5(4), 73-85.
- Stevens, T. (2020). Suppressing communities: An analysis of LGBTQ+ censorship in libraries. *Pathfinder: A Canadian Journal for Information Science Students and Early Career Professionals*, 1(2), 51-64.
- Trivedi, G. (2019). *Made in Heaven Unpacks the Politics Behind Marriages in India*. Feminism in India.
- Uniyal, C., & Mirza, A. (2024, January 1). Digitalization, New Media & OTT: Case Study of Ushering New Perspectives for Gender Issues. Undefined (undefined). Vardhan, H. (2020). Representation of LGBT Community in Web Series: A Study of Netflix. *International Journal of Scientific Research and Engineering Development*, 3(3), 8.
- Wahyono, S. B., Wirasti, M. K., & Ratmono, B. M. (2020). Audience Reception of Hoax Information on Social Media in the Post-Truth Era. *Jurnal Komunikasi Indonesia*, 9(2), 7. Wandrekar, J., & Nigudkar, A. (2020, January 1). What Do We Know About LGBTQIA+ Mental Health in India? A Review of Research From 2009 to 2019. *SAGE Publishing*, 2(1), 26-36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2631831820918129>