

Setting Narrative: A Study How OTT Content has influenced the women and sports in India

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Abstract:

In India, the emergence of Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms has transformed media consumption and changed the way society tells stories. This study examines how OTT content affects two crucial areas: women's representation and the evolution of sports culture. This study explores how streaming platforms have evolved into change agents that promote empowerment and redefine conventional beliefs AND WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS.

Key words: OTT, Women representations, Empowerment, Social change.

Introduction:

Women and sports have been two contradicting ideas for the Indian society to the tune of almost manufacturing an oxymoron. The Indian social fabric has represented itself as the flamboyant crusader of- world leadership (Nehru/Modi era), software valleys, best military might, yoga guru and what not; but when it dawns to show its semblance in sports the land of billions falls short not by an inch but considerable margins. Lack of funding in sports has been the pain that Indian sports has borne for lot of time. Among other factors cited at galore are-discrimination, favouritism, negligence, too much pressure, lack of - state of art facilities, apt training programs and best coaches. Ananya Raj Kakoti in her article states-“In India, women’s cricket is slowly gaining ground with the launch of the Women’s Premier League (WPL), but the disparity in pay between male and female cricketers remains vast”. But this paper aims to fetch into the bigger pool of problem which stands at the grassroot level viz. the possibility of representation of half the population is almost ignored. In the journey through the paper, we tend to implore the long pending issue of- ‘women in sports’. Ananya Raj Kakoti states-“Gender inequality in sports is a pervasive issue that affects athletes across the globe”. Various theories would be put up to understand and validate the role of OTT in shaping the new space for the women representation in the sports arena.

The schematic fabric of any society dictates the thought and action of the people which bear it. When the question is about sports the Indian/ subcontinental lookout has been way more favouring the men than the women in its treatment of possibility of

participation. This has resulted in development of underrepresentation and gender taboo for the women folk. Visual literature has a predominant role in shaping the societal lookout. It has gained the steam and momentum even more in post Covid times. Wherein people have gotten to explore and implore through plethora of digital content at ease and click of their need and reason.

Visible gender portrayals shape the formative youth's perception, making them learn, unlearn and relearn social nuances and norms. They make-aware socio-cultural role in the gender mediascape, the relegation of interrogation on taboos and their subsequent, understated role in shaping societal transformation in the context of Indian OTT's women needs immediate address for the youth to be gender sensitive and responsible viewers of Indian OTT media and the stakeholders to observe social/digital accountability to shaping the new inclusivity.

A) Importance of OTT:

Infotainment has a wider catchment that cuts across all margins and is accessible to all sections of society. Yannick Colaco states- "Digital platforms are changing how India experiences sports." OTT's now ubiquitous nature, it has become an infotainment surrogate in contemporary times. India, one of the youths dominated and pluralistic countries, is open to newness of thought, lingo and is more receptive with its acceptance of multifarious norms on the rise and OTT, like any other media service, is reflective of ever-dynamic socio-cultural concerns. With SDG Goal 5 bent on achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls, women, an always center-staged and pervasive counterpart of civilizations, necessitates exploration. Additionally, with the immense outreach of new media and social media, storytelling has gone beyond entertainment and fantasy. Today, web series are known for its handling of conflicting forces of modernity and gender stereotypes, which in turn makes for a compelling viewing.

It is critical to problematize the trajectory of women's representations and social stigmas associated with taboos in Indian OTT spaces. A comprehensive comprehension of live streaming remains elusive until the intricate interplay of the unifying factor of gender is thoroughly examined. Aamer Ejaz writes- "Enter OTT platforms, the game-changers in the world of sports media. Tamasha, powered by Jazz, has emerged as the key player in bringing women's sports to wider audiences". However, the contemporary audience has witnessed increased diversity with the emergence of such platforms, with a noticeable rise in the portrayal of robust female protagonists, LGBTQIA+ characters, and narratives that question conventional gender roles and norms creating prospects for a transformative shift away from the traditional binary understanding of heteronormativity and towards a more inclusive recognition of non-binary gender identities in visual media. By placing emphasis on the creation and dissemination of inclusive content and actively

engaging with audience feedback, over-the-top (OTT) platforms have the potential to play a significant role in fostering a media landscape that is more equitable and representative. Aamer Ejaz describes -“The rise of OTT platforms represents more than just access—it signifies inclusion and diversity. These platforms are enabling a new narrative for women’s cricket, where gender is no longer a limiting factor”.

B) Gender and OTT:

Yannick Colaco opines-“Digital platforms showcase diverse sports and boost women's sports popularity”. Gender is a unifying factor among the various depictions. For several decades, scholarly examinations of mythology and religious texts have yielded substantial evidence regarding the presence of influential gender roles, and the inadvertent manifestation of patriarchy within society. Crossdressing was a commonly observed practice in theatrical productions in England, particularly in the context of Shakespearean drama. An examination of the intersectionality between gender, sexuality, and live streaming can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of gender and sexuality within digital contexts, while also shedding light on the nature of live streaming as a phenomenon.

The role of gender holds considerable importance for the audience of over-the-top (OTT) platforms across various dimensions. The identification and relatability of characters and narratives correspond to the viewer's personal gender identity or mirror their lived experiences, potentially strengthening their emotional and cognitive engagement with the content. The exposure of viewers to a diverse array of gender representations has the potential to effectively challenge prevailing stereotypes, expand their comprehension of gender, and affirm their personal identities by cultivating a feeling of affiliation and establishing a media landscape that is more encompassing. The socio-cultural implications of gender representation can serve as a catalyst for a broader exploration of gender-related issues, enhance awareness, stimulate discourse, and facilitate societal transformation. It can influence individuals' viewing preferences, interests, and content choices and therefore media consumption patterns by frequently employing data analysis techniques to tailor recommendations to individual users, potentially incorporating gender-related variables in the process, which in turn can significantly impact industry practices in the overall entertainment industry.

The standing of women in any culture and community determines its growth and helps rank a nation (Towns). The importance of women since Mother Eve is undeniable. Spencer believed that "increase of female influence, would affect the advancement of society 'in a marked manner (Towns)". Marx and Engels (1956) (Reid) said the

“transformation of a historical era can always be determined by the condition of progress of women towards liberty” (Towns). Through roles, status is understood. Thus, the best method to assess the status of women in any group or category is to investigate their roles and performance trends. India's rich culture worshipped women as goddesses. Women were the foundation of Indian culture (Sharma).

Setting up new Schema:

Habitual Indian cinemagoers have developed associations with the flicks. Moviegoers' expectations and experiences affect cinema culture. This habitual movie audience is also exposed to other media, which may support their gender roles and beliefs. Ads and TV programs in India stereotype women. (Roy) claims that most domesticity ads portrayed Indian women as housewives, although a few sent an opposite message. These commercials contrasted tradition with modernity. His 1998 Indian advertising study demonstrates patriarchy remains. The advertising portrays women as independent and autonomous; nonetheless, its inclusion does not need significant alterations to the prevailing sexist mentality (Roy). These commercials appeal to women because they identify with the idea. Television is another popular media that may reinforce preconceptions every day. (Misra and Roychowdhury) say most programs are centred on middle-class notions of wives and mothers. In a nation with 36% female agricultural workers, women are still considered non-producers and confined indoors. Emerging narratives and representation tactics create an irreconcilable tension between the complete liberation of women and indigenous social and cultural norms and practices" (Misra and Roychowdhury).

a) Gender Taboos:

Taboos identify and preserve "the sacred" or appropriate social conduct, according to French sociologist (Isometsä). Others agreed, arguing that communities create taboos for its members for self-preservation and tradition-building. To explain taboo, these theories are structuralist (Douglas). Social institutions are responsible for managing and preserving society. A social gap exists between taboo practitioners and non-practitioners. Structure may also manifest as negation, prohibition, and limitation. Ananya Raj Kakoti states-“In India, societal pressures often push women to prioritize domestic roles over sports, although athletes like Dutee Chand and Hima Das have successfully challenged these norms and excelled internationally”. Looking at the comments by the people on the new all women sports channel started in United States one of a reader commented: “Ever since I was a little kid, I always wanted to play sports,”

Goldberg said on The Tonight Show. “My brother could play. He played baseball, he played softball, he played basketball, he played everything And they would say, ‘Oh, hi little girl.’ (Josh Sim) Strictly specifying the gender taboo associated with the sports at large. Make it yet another cluster thing to the male hegemony.

Gender has defined social differentiation for how long? Always divided societies? Classroom Gender Stereotypes Schools shape kids' identities more than families. For children, it supports the “differences” between gendered identities presented as normal. Most importantly, kids will learn that “gendered identities” are social constructions and gender does not affect behaviour. Judith Butler writes that when the created nature of gender is considered as entirely independent of sex, gender transforms into a free-floating fabrication, meaning “man” and “masculine” can refer to male or female bodies and “woman” and “feminine” to male (Hess).

Stereotyping reinforces gender stereotypes and conventions, promotes sexism, harassment, and aggression in males, and hinders women's professional aspirations. Exposure to objectifying and sexualizing imagery may result in the internalization of conventional beauty standards, misogyny, maltreatment, and body shame. These representations may result in symptoms of eating disorders, increased body surveillance, and worse quality of life regarding body image. Nevertheless, Indian online series often portray women's stereotypes, hate speech, including abrasive language, and gender-based biases.

Ananya Raj Kakoti states “Participation and opportunity gaps persist globally, with women facing more barriers to sports at both the grassroots and professional levels.” When it comes to looking for the mode to fill this gap in the women participation an the opportunities, media portrayal may change society's views, especially on oppressed groups. The media's prominent impact is clear since most people worldwide use media to raise awareness, learn about global events, and stay informed. (McQuail) says that the media is responsible for highlighting and promoting systematic exposure, as well as shaping concepts and values.

When they behave and communicate online, the audience encounters and experiences. Despite civil rights advancements, discriminatory gender-based depictions persist in certain circumstances. Scientific study on media portrayals and gender stereotypes, objectification, and sexualization in culture is prevalent. Indian film is rapidly evolving due to new media (Singh). Instead of uplifting women or stressing their pain, stories now explore what women want. They show real individuals living real lives and coping with their consequences.

b) The New Change:

Female-centred stories are real because of their complexity. Movies like: Chak de India, Dangal, Shabaash Mittu, Goomer, Saal Khadoos etc. have championed the idea of sports inclusivity of women and have equally depicted how the society still envisions the two- 'SPORTS and WOMEN'. If we want our content to set the tone for the future and portray women as societal exemplars, OTT will be essential. Women in Indian culture are expected to do household duties and submit to males. Television, movies, and other traditional media have reinforced these gender norms. Indian film is rapidly evolving due to new media (Singh).

Despite Indians' commitment to equality and egalitarianism, many continue to adhere to traditional gender norms and roles (Evans et al.)

The term, over-the-top, denotes systems, which have shown remarkable worldwide expansion in recent years (Fernández; Sharma and Lulandala). OTT is a mechanism that circumvents conventional media distribution channels, such as cable and television, emphasizing the streaming of entertainment content, including web series and films. OTT content has emerged as the preeminent independent multimedia platform, giving consumers total autonomy over their media choices (Puthiyakath and Goswami). As to Statista Market Forecast, the number of OTT video users was 3.26 billion in 2022, increasing to 3.51 billion in 2023, and is anticipated to reach 4.22 billion by 2027. The OTT platform market is anticipated to expand at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 10.01% from 2023 to 2027, culminating in an estimated market value of \$462.90 billion by 2027. (Deloitte) indicated that OTT having grabbed supporters by having a significant effect and gaining traction due to their potential future, suggesting that OTT services would affect conventional media consumption.

Online and electronic media are gaining popularity owing to reasonable internet connection and costs, enhancing viewers' feelings of togetherness (Braun; Lu et al.). The quality and accessibility enhance audience happiness and acceptability (J. Kim et al.; Lu et al.; Koenuma et al.). Attributes like mobility and superiority that provide content access in their desired vernacular and at their convenience, hence encouraged greater regular usage of OTT services (Flayelle et al.; Susanno et al.). (Lee et al.) emphasized audience adoption of OTT platforms attributes to personalization, content quality, cost-effectiveness, and individual choices.

The dynamic landscape of OTT platforms been elevated to novel concepts within television audience research, and the financial dynamics of the industry have experienced positive effects since the pandemic. It subsequently emerged as a disruptive form of entertainment known as the "new at home" medium, which aligned with the increasing desire of its audience and solidified its position as a prevalent cultural presence within households.

The Theory of Consumption Values (Chakraborty et al.), Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology-UTAUT2 (Bhattacharyya et al.), and Psychological Ownership Theory (Soren and Chakraborty) are show how industrial conceptions of new media become participatory activities that redefine audiences as content makers and consumers. The simple fact that technology advancement enables users to access video services that can seamlessly utilize any material on any device with an Internet connection (Yousaf et al.) has gained the right surface the above mentioned theories; shaping the viewers and the viewpoint. Further, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) help to comprehend over-the-top (OTT) user behavior (Leung and Chen; Malewar and Bajaj). The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) in information systems posits that perceived simplicity and perceived effectiveness influence technology use behavior (Davis). (Bhattacharyya et al.) used a modified UTAUT2 model to elucidate OTT usage, highlighting its robustness and reliability. (Basuki et al.) examined perceived ease of use and utility. The enjoyment and readiness to engage influence online movie-watching behavior during the COVID-19 epidemic. The TAM model elucidates customer behaviour in digital video streaming. (Kim and Park) demonstrated the influence of innovativeness, subjective standards, and reputation incentives on satisfaction.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) is extensively used to elucidate media consumption. The UGT analyses how individuals proactively pursue media and information to fulfil their requirements (Sahu et al.) This concept examines individuals' everyday media consumption (Ruggiero). Media consumption is purpose-driven, it asserts. This concept underscores the way consumers use media to fulfill their wants, rather than the impact of media on them (Sadana and Sharma). OTT services prioritize the desires, motivations, and pleasure of media consumers (Sadana and Sharma). Behm-Morawitz and Mastro observed that films influence gender stereotyping. Prominent visual media, gender role stereotypes, and sexism may shape public opinion, beliefs, and attitudes via imitation, idolization, normalization, and the sensitization to gender disparity. The sociocultural framework of attitudes, values, and beliefs influences the emotions of both the director and the audience.

The Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci resurrected hegemony theory. He defines hegemony as political, social, and ideological supremacy. Artz (Artz) added that hegemony requires permission. Hegemony is the direction of mutually advantageous interactions between groups or classes, not domination or force. It is a group or institution's temporary dominance. Gramsci (Santucci) states that hegemony can only be accomplished by bribery and agreement since power and legitimacy are the essential pillars of the theory (Artz). Gramsci understood hegemony as an ideology that explains how social groupings rule without violence. Numerous media portrayals of genders are erroneous, clichéd, and limiting. The representation of gender in media encompasses

three areas. Initially, the underrepresentation of women erroneously suggests that males are the cultural norm while women are either secondary or invisible. Gender stereotyping reinforces existing gender biases. Third, male-female relationships validate gender-based violence and roles. The persistent misperception leads us to presume that males surpass females in number and are the norm. Thus, portrayals of women on this substantial platform promote cultural and ideological notions of women's autonomy within the context of social and political-economic progress. In 2011, Hoijer introduced Social Representations Theory (SRT) as a new theory for media research. In the 1960s, Serge Moscovici developed Social Representation Theory to explain social meaning creation, exchange, and interpretation. Social representation theory explains how people and groups construct shared understandings of social events and their effects on social dynamics. Social Representation Theory emphasizes communal processes that produce social reality knowledge, convictions, and values (Moscovici). Social representation theory's anchoring and objectification apply. Another key concept in social representation theory is objectification. (Moscovici) defines objectification as turning abstract ideas into shareable objects. SRT explains how media gender roles are created and transmitted. Media Representation Theory examines how media portrays social groups, identities, and concerns, impacting public perceptions and attitudes. The theory lets viewers critique the onscreen portrayal of Indian women and their gender roles, revealing its wider implications. Media Representation Theory reveals the portrayal's power, beliefs, and stereotypes. Media influences women's domestic norms, expectations, and social hierarchies, which academics can study. Depictions influence viewers' gender roles and domesticity perceptions. Media Representation theory can be used to study the series' portrayal of Indian women's empowerment and domestic negotiation. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall backed Media Representation Theory. Media encodes and decodes meaning and meaning-making representation, according to (Hall). The study and public opinion on gender representation in media were guided by media representation theory. Media representation theory stresses media power and social norms. In Social Learning Theory (1977), Albert Bandura revealed that individuals acquire knowledge from others, including media representations. Film portrayals of women may reinforce stereotypes and societal attitudes, influencing women's opportunities (Bandura). By streaming major women's cricket tournaments like the ICC Women's ODI World Cup 2022 and T20 World Cup 2024, OTTs are breaking through the barriers of traditional media, making women's cricket more accessible to millions of viewers. (Aamer Ejaz)

The above discussed theories are the articulates of the new change and how it is being reared through a combination of visual experience and the viewer learning and thereon emergence of behavioural patterns which is shaping the new.

Women sports in India:

Women sports in India seem to have not really taken off in their true spirits. The engagement and appreciation are often defined by the media reach to the audiences. Since telecast rights are costly most of the broadcasters have shied away from being the official telecasters. PlayOn Sports on LinkedIn opined- "Viewer interest is often dismissed as minimal or passing. Investment is widely considered risky. Any push for a bigger piece of the broadcast pie for women's sports has typically been positioned as a noble, if futile, crusade".OTT has given that given that ease and viewership podium to be able to make hit at the women sports. Recently launching of a new channel which is- all women sports channel has seen the light of the day by US comedian Whoopi Goldberg. Yet despite the grass turning green, we should not fail to contemplate the undercurrent which matters to be addressed now and continually in the long term as well.

Underrepresentation:

Women representation in Indian sports and big events like Olympics, have been the witness to the telltale, with few noted achievers and probably only contenders bringing laurels and gaining some fame like: Karnam Malleshwari won a bronze at the 2000 Sydney Olympics in weightlifting, followed Saikhom Mirabai Chanu at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Wrestling the popular sport in India also had its limited quota of fame with wrestlers like Sakshi Malik becoming the first woman wrestler to win an Olympic medal. Likewise in now hot selling badminton names like- Saina Nehwal and Olympic medallist P V Sindhu only get to see the daylight. India's leading former tennis player and presently the head of Sports Excellence and Scouting, JSW Sports, Manisha Malhotra, (Abhishek Singh) talked about the changing landscape of Indian sports and women representation and affirmed the scene is changing and would soon begin to yield results but the changes being induced must continuous and lasting to upkeep the momentum. Manisha Malhotra (Abhishek Singh) notes that the participation of women overall has increased over the years at the summit, from just 2.2% in 1990 to now standing at 47% of the contingent at Tokyo 2020. India itself fielded a contingent that consisted of 44% women. An interesting perspective here lies in the fact that the upliftment of women not only comes in terms of the sport but whenever we have had women champions, they have actually played a key role in uplifting the society around them and have also helped in breaking the glass ceiling, enabling more women to take up the sport. If we even look at the women's hockey team, they came in fourth at Tokyo 2020, yet their performance probably touched more hearts than the men's hockey team winning a bronze medal after so many years. That is, I believe the true power of women being successful in sports is that they bring an element of empathy that no one else in sports can.

Women's human rights include full and equitable participation in society. Women are inadequately represented in politics, entertainment, sports and the workforce

worldwide. Cinema is among the most prevalent forms of entertainment in India, where women's roles are distinctly delineated within its patriarchal framework. In her 1974 book "From Reverence to Rape," (Haskell) revealed that cinema mirrored society's social construction of women. Feminist film critics have always scrutinized gender stereotypes in movies. They generated key cinematic concepts to advocate for gender equality by highlighting women. The second wave of feminism in the United States and women's studies throughout the 1960s and 1970s influenced feminist film theory. The alternative feminist perspective on films was facilitated by feminist cinema theory. Feminist film criticism advocates for gender equality by contesting patriarchal male subjectivity and the objectification of women. Mulvey asserts that cinema implicitly employs women as sexual symbols, reinforcing the male as the subject and financial benefactor, while positioning the female as the carrier of meaning (White). Cinematic portrayals of women objectify and restrict them to fulfill men's psychological requirements and patriarchal norms, implying that women are fetishized and idealized rather than given the opportunity to impact a narrative.

Sexism:

Sexism influences prevailing societal perceptions. The discourse about sexism and gender role stereotyping in Indian cinema, television, and advertising is ongoing. Sexism is directed at women. Sports participation of women and their influence and connect has been hit and run by the sexist code. Lack of acknowledgement of skill, serious intention to continue and excel have been marred more often than not at the ground level. Movies like Ghoomer, Shabaash Mituu and Chak de India have entailed the long burdensome journey of women sports. Aamer Ejaz writes-“Through platforms like Tamasha, the women’s cricket team is no longer playing in the shadows of their male counterparts”.

Conclusion:

The portrayal of media has a pervasive and ubiquitous presence in contemporary society. The visual representations shown on billboards and the narratives we engage with through various displays demonstrate the influential capacity of media to shape our cognitive frameworks, ideological convictions, and behavioral tendencies. Ananya Raj Kakoti states “Increased media coverage and sponsorships are also helping to close the gap”. These representations go beyond simple entertainment and function as mediums for communicating values, conventions, and ideas that have an impact on society's behavior. The impact of media portrayals on society emphasizes the dual effects they have, including both advantageous and detrimental consequences. The perpetuation of stereotypes via media portrayals may occur unintentionally, reinforcing preconceived notions about gender, race, ethnicity, and other social categories.

Understanding the representations of women on Indian over-the-top (OTT) platforms has great importance, as it acts as a mirror of the changing dynamics of gender portrayal in media and its impact on society's viewpoints. Analysing through the review of scholarly literature provides valuable insights into whether over-the-top (OTT) platforms are actively challenging traditional gender standards or inadvertently reinforcing pre-existing preconceptions. Women's sports globally—are given the space they deserve, creating a more balanced, gender-equal playing field for future generations. (Aamer Ejaz)

Bollywood portrayals of women validate sexism and their role in Indian culture. Bollywood cinema audiences surpass the general population, and the ideals shown in these films become embedded in Indian culture, influencing public opinion. But the new has arrived and OTT has its role to play- The 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup saw record-breaking viewership, demonstrating the growing global interest in women's sports. In India, athletes like PV Sindhu have attracted major sponsorships, and the Women's Premier League has generated corporate interest in women's cricket. However, media coverage remains overwhelmingly focused on men's sports, particularly cricket, and more balanced coverage is needed to ensure sustained progress for women's sports. (Ananya Raj Kakoti). Not only in India but as a world wide recognised scenario the trend has been picking up- "Over the past few weeks we have witnessed record-breaking crowds, significant global broadcast audiences and staggering digital metrics, highlighting the truly global impact of this ground-breaking event."(Neil Johnston)

The popularity has been growing with women's sporting events resulting in higher ratings, greater attendance, more sponsors, increased prize winnings and greater media coverage. (Brad Adgate) Through platforms like Tamasha, the women's cricket team is no longer playing in the shadows of their male counterparts. (Aamer Ejaz) For instance, budding hockey players can now watch not just international tournaments but also local leagues and junior championships. This exposure is critical in inspiring the next generation of athletes and helping them upskill and learn. (Yannick Colaco) Despite marked improvements in interest, the NCAA Men's tournament remains one of the blue-chip events each year. (Brad Adgate)

Digital platforms are not just revolutionizing fandom; they are playing a significant role in the development of India's sporting ecosystem. (Yannick Colaco) The rising popularity of women's sports in India is evident in the growing crowds at events and increased viewership on TV and OTT platforms. This surge is not limited to hockey; it's a broader trend reflecting a national shift in the perception and support of women athletes. (The New Indian Express) Digital has played a key role in increasing access to sports which have often been overlooked due to limitations of linear broadcast. (Yannick Colaco)

The digital revolution in sports is not just about convenience; it's about enhancing the experience for fans and athletes. Platforms will also keep evolving and it will be critical to

keep innovating to stay relevant and keep viewers engaged. As India's sports ecosystem grows, digital platforms will be at the heart of this transformation, shaping the future of sports in the country. (Yannick Colaco)

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