Original Article

Viewing cultural connections through analysis of the representation of transgenders and trans sexuality in recent Bollywood and OTT

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Abstract

The mainstreamed dimorphism of sexuality has long called for conformity to the social construction of gender binary, particularly that of normative masculinity. Society has thus mostly drawn lines on questions about body, self, and sexual identity. Consequently, till today there have been cultural stereotypes and social taboos that concern gender identity. Media is considered a major source and agent of socialisation and has begun to reflect more on these socially significant issues. So, understanding the framing of gender-fluid identities as well as analysing the context of sexuality, is a pressing issue in contemporary society. In India, where traditional gender roles are deeply ingrained, the subject of transgender sexuality and romantic relationships has been a taboo topic for a long time. So, this paper looks at the themes of trans-sexuality and relationships in the recent Bollywood and OTT content. It employs a qualitative research design involving a content analysis focused on portraying transgender characters, trans sexuality, and romantic relationships in the sample content. The research relied on the qualitative approach to identify themes and patterns in the data to reveal that this topic is being discussed more boldly and with nuanced understanding to some extent in recent years, but shades of stereotyping still exist. The study examines the impact of such representation on the audience and culture. The analysis reveals that there has been an improvement in the representation of transgender characters in recent years, and such representation has contributed to creating awareness and understanding of trans issues in Indian society.

Introduction

Transgenders and society

The idea of cis-gender sexuality, represented as male and female, has been mainstreamed to a large extent conforming mostly to the framework of normative masculinity. Any other variance has mostly been viewed as a deviation from social norms and religion. Thus, this social construction of the gender binary has resonated with social discourses, narratives, and media representations. Societies in many places worldwide have therefore drawn lines on questions about body, self, and sexual identity. Consequently, till today there have been cultural stereotypes and social taboos that concern the shifts in gender identities viewing these individuals as the unacceptable 'other'. The country's LGBTQ+ community has a complex history, which has seen both challenges and a recent transition despite the presence of certain groups like the transgender communities in Indian society for centuries. It is believed that the world's oldest recorded same-sex relationships and record of gender and sexual diversity in ancient texts is seen in India. [1] Yet, in matters of social perception, access to health and other services, they are stigmatised even through media representation, and when we talk about their lives, bigger questions arise due to the relationship between them. The transgender portrayal represents a sense of 'othering' reflected in different media content, genres, and formats through news, advertisements, films, and social media like memes, reels, etc.

Media plays a significant role in society as it shapes ideas and colours our perceptions. Many researchers have established that the visual medium strongly influences the audience. Thus, cinema significantly influences Indian culture and society, including attitudes toward gender and sexuality. The Indian entertainment and popular culture industry is one of the biggest and largest film industry in the world, as around 1,500 to 2,000 films are released annually in at-least twenty languages. Bollywood, the Hindi-language film industry based in Mumbai, is the biggest in this network.[2] With the rise of the OTT platforms and their market share, the size of the audience consuming cinema and OTT content is also regarded as one of the biggest.

Although the portrayal of transgender characters in media has been a topic of discussion for decades, it has been noted that recently, there has been a focus on the visibility and representation of transgender characters and trans sexuality in Bollywood and OTT web series. However, the accuracy and authenticity of these portrayals have been debatable and perpetuate negative stereotypes and in accuracies about the transgender community, which even this community reports often. The increased representation may seem 'positive on its surface', but it is flawed, and transgender and gender-diverse people are still majorly under represented by the media.[3] It has been seen that they are often misrepresented.[4] Regarding sexual minorities, some cultures lack the neutral or positive language to refer to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and the larger community (LGBTQ+).[5]

Transgender sexuality, romantic relationships, and media

Transgender communities are present in almost every society, but certain aspects of their social and personal lives are usually oblivion. Some perceptions have been strengthened, like seeing them as dancers and singers during weddings or other celebrations, asking for money, or cursing in case of refusals. The mainstream narrative has mostly ignored their lives, journey, emotional side and choices. Consequently, transgender sexuality and relationships have been seen through the lens of taboo in media, including the cinema. The representation in films would often consider inappropriate or too sensitive to discuss nuances about their lives in a film plot. The portrayal of transgender characters is often limited to stereotypical and negative depictions such as sex workers, beggars, or comedic relief. Mardian feels that trans people have been portrayed as sad jokes by the mainstream media, including cinema.[6] Jobe studies American news, television, and films

between 1975 and 2013 for their correctness and objectivity in portrayingtrans people and transgender issues but found the presence of negative stereotypes about their life and struggles reinforcing common misconceptions. [7] Negative portrayal [8] and lack of representation [9] perpetuate discrimination and marginalization of the transgender community through these storylines and film treatment. Research has linked discrimination and psychological distress, with family support, identity pride, and particularly peer support serving as protective factors.[10] Transgender individuals often experience significant challenges due to social stigma and discrimination[11] impacting their psychosexual and psychosocial development. The lack of acceptance and understanding or discrimination towards transgender individuals in society can negatively affect their mental health and overall well-being.[12] Film and television often cast transwomen as villains, creating problems for their fight for equal treatment. [13]

Many studies have found the representation of transgender characters in media to be historically problematic, often perpetuating negative stereotypes and being laden with erroneous details about the transgender community.[14-17] While analysing the literature on the projection of trans-community and trans-sexuality representation in Bollywood and Indian cinema, one can locate a limited corpus. However, some works have examined the portrayal of transgender and trans-sexuality in Hindi cinema and media texts. Most have found their portrayal as 'stereotypical and sensational', including Chatterjee [18] who suggests that the societal treatment of this group as the deviant 'other' is mirrored in contemporary Hindi cinema with few characters depicted. They are either reduced to comic caricatures (Hum Hai Rahi Pyaar Ke, 1993, Raja Hindustani, 1996); or to the demonised eunuch as the embodiment of evil (in Sadak, 1991; Sangharsh 1999). Kaur [19] also believes that mainstream Hindi cinema has not been able to do much justice to queer identities. Sabharwal and Sen[20] in their study

regarding the portrayal of sexual minorities in Hindi films, state that Bollywood or Hindi cinema has traditionally adopted an attitude of denial or mockery towards LGBTQ individuals. The portrayal of sexual minorities revolves around sarcasm, comedy and negative representation but alternative cinema presents them more realistically and can raise, express and suggest possible solutions to their problems properly.

The recent depiction has seen some shift, and more representation is there, yet it was not nuanced and accurate as LGBTQ+ are typically presented as comical characters or ignorantly depicted eunuchs or as villains[21] like Masti (2004), Kyaa Kool Hain Hum (2005), Partner (2008), Sangharsh (1997), etc. Riggs, Colton and Bartholomaeus[22] also agree upon trans-visibility in media, but they call it 'mundane transphobia' based on their study on Tv Show Big Brother UK as they observe that historically, such visibility has been largely negative, reliant upon pathologising understandings of trans people's lives. Recently, their portrayal has been somewhat positive across different media organisations seeking to understand and focus on trans experiences, but it is still sensationalist.

However, few films portrayed LGBT characters in a positive light and challenged traditional gender norms are also present across the time line. Positive media portrayal of this community could be helpful in the mind set shift, even in extreme cases. [23] Also, it would be imperative to let them reclaim their own story, as Jayaprakash [24] notes that even the genre of self-expression through autobiography and literature is increasingly becoming popular among the trans community and is helping them in the reconstruction of their identity, better represent their other ed bodies, and bring their alternative narrative into the existing discourses that have caused them harm. They can negotiate their public spaces by breaking stereotypes. The literature on the representation of transgender and trans sexuality in OTT series is still emerging, and the quality and

authenticity of these portrayals are being examined. If Bollywood and OTT web series present transgender characters as hyper-sexual, it can further perpetuate negative stereotypes and stigmatisation of the transgender community.

Thus, analysing the portrayal of trans-sexuality is an under-researched area in the Indian context and there is a limited understanding of how their relationships are woven into the film plot since it does not show much depth in the film literature. This research paper analyzes how transgender sexuality and romantic relationships are portrayed in Bollywood and Indian OTT web series and how these portrayals are viewed vis-a-vis taboos surrounding these topics. By examining various examples of transgender representation in Indian cinema and OTT, this research paper aims to shed light on how these portrayals have evolved and their impact on audiences. This analysis will provide valuable insights into the current state of transgender representation in the Indian media and how it can be improved in the future. Overall, this research paper aims to contribute towards building an understanding of transgender sexuality and romantic relationships in the sample media texts and to seek open and honest discussions about these topics in Indian society.

Conceptual underpinnings

The inter sectionality of gender, sexuality, media representation, and cultural discourse forms the foundation of the theoretical framework for this research study. Media representation is a crucial framework for this study. The term "media representation" relates to how people and groups are portrayed in a variety of media.[25] Social constructionism is one of the main theoretical theories that guide this investigation, which underlines how people and groups create meanings and identities via social interactions and cultural discourse. [26, 27] It guides on how cultural discourse on gender and sexuality shapes the meanings and identities of transgender characters in the setting of this study. Cultural discourse impacts the meanings and identities of transgender people, consider psychology from a sociocultural viewpoint.[28] Critical race theory is utilised to understand how the intersection of race and gender affects how transgender characters are portrayed in media. [29]

Inter sectionality theory is a further significant theoretical foundation for this research.[30] According to this hypothesis, several forms of social inequality, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and class, intersect and interact in complicated ways to influence how people feel privilege and marginalisation. Intersectionality is a term that can be used in the context of this study to describe how transgender people and their relationships are portrayed in popular culture. The fields of psychology and sociology are also connected to this research. To comprehend how the portrayal of transgender characters in media can affect transgender people's self-identities, one can turn to social identity theory.[31]

Methodology

The objectives were to analyse the evolution of the representation of transgender characters and relationships in Bollywood and OTT web series through a psychological and sociological lens. Specifically, this paper also explores how transsexuality is portrayed in these media texts and links it with their psychosexual development. The overarching research question was to understand how transgender characters were portrayed in these films and web series released in the last three decades and what patterns and themes are used for their representation.

A qualitative analysis framework was used that involved qualitative content analysis, offering a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the media's portrayal of transgender characters and their relationships in the studied texts. Analysis was done in several stages, including data collection, coding, and interpretation. In this research, the data collection involved selecting relevant series and

movies that feature transgender characters. A coding scheme was used for systematic identification and classification through coding of key features of the characters, such as their gender identity, like male-to-female, romantic relationships, and overall representation as positive, negative, or stereotypical. Finally, the interpretation involved analysing the coded data to identify patterns and themes and drawing broader conclusions about the representation of transgender characters in the select sample.

Sample

Relevance sampling was carried out to choose the most suitable sample that included those films and web series from the last thirty years that feature transexual characters prominently in the form of the film plot or sub-plot. The sample films were chosen based on the presence of transgender characters concerning their relationships and life as part of the film plot rather than just transvestism being depicted as a trans joke.

Thus, the most relevant films and web series between 1990-2022, namely Sadak as S (1991), Tamanna as T (1997), Darmiyaan as D (1997), Sacred Games as SG (2018), Laxmi as L (2020), Chandigarh Kare Ashiqui as CKA (2021) and Gangubai Kathiawadi as GK (2022) were analysed. Other films with indirect references were studied to assess how the idea of transsexuality was projected. This list helps follow the pattern and trace the evolution of their representation in Hindi entertainment content.

Analysis

The qualitative analysis of different variables of the sample films and web series is presented below:

I: Type of the transgender character: In all the studied films and web series, the trans characters were presented as Male-to-Female (MTF) transsexuals, and no character was female-to-male. This was even seen in almost all those films which depicted transvestitism.

II: Analysis of character sketch, representation, relationships, profession, addiction, and themes:

Film: Sadak (1991) directed by Mahesh Bhatt

◆ Transgender character and actor: 'Maharani' played by Sadashiv Amrapurkar.

◆ Representation: Maharani's role in this movie has a stereotypical personality. A transgender, inter sex person, also known as a "Hijra" in Indian culture, Maharani is the antagonist- a brothel madam, who kidnaps young girls and forces them into prostitution in addition to engaging in other criminal acts. Pooja Bhatt, the female lead is saved by the male lead, Sanjay Dutt, so Maharani conducts a manhunt for her. By possessing a stereotypical attitude and structural qualities that portray trans people negatively, this character perpetuates harmful assumptions about transgender persons as criminals or derives comedic relief in places. Many reviews find the character's portrayal insulting, dehumanising, and harsh, and her performance leaves the audience with an unpleasant memory. The film does show the use of different substances.

◆ Relationships: In S, the villain Maharani is ruthless with the sex workers and all those kidnapped girls brought to her, including the protagonist. There is no romantic relationship between this trans character, just flirtatious interactions of a 'brothel madam'. She is incharge of a group of criminals including a few trans characters.

Film: Tamanna (1997) directed by Mahesh Bhatt

◆ Transgender character and actor: 'Tiku', is protagonist Tamanna's father and Paresh Rawal plays the role.

- Representation: It is a pioneer film in trans-representation as it portrays Tiku, in a sympathetic and nuanced manner, with a layered depiction of human emotions challenging social prejudices and stereotypes against this community. It is an inter-sex character, and there is a lack of clarity on the character's gender identity as the cis characters of the film refer to Tiku as 'him'. Tiku is a Muslim performing religious practices, and the overwhelming plotline about parenting may have hampered the expression of sexuality in the film. Tiku is a makeup and hair artist in the film industry, and his mother was a leading actress of the yesteryears. The character's struggles and experiences are portrayed with sensitivity and compassion, presenting a positive message for acceptance and understanding. However, a critical perspective about the film can be that for their acceptance into the social order, they need to be shown in a feminine manner, with a care giving nature, of sacrificing nature. This reinforces certain social stereotypes as deviation from being a 'martyr' projects them negatively, unlike cis-characters.

- Relationships: Tiku does not have a romantic relationship but is extremely affectionate towards Tamanna, an abandoned character whom he rears as his daughter amidst strong criticism. He also has a strong bond with his mother- a leading actor in the past who dies at the beginning of the film. Tiku is a protective parent and has humane interactions with other cis and trans characters despite receiving disgust from society in general. There are strong friendships between Tiku and his cis friend, his son. The parental depiction was a shift from the mainstream discourse of only presenting the trans community as dancers and sex workers, but later Tiku becomes a dancer like other Hijras, but this community acts very positively throughout the film.

Film: Darmiyaan (1997) directed by Kalpana Lajmi

- Transgender character and actor: Imi, played by Arif Zakaria.

- Representation: This is one of the most complex sketches in which trans character is drawn mostly sensitively, with the storyline focussing on Imi's life story and character development as part of the film's structure. Imi is an inter-sex character whose journey as a 'Hijra' is projected through different subplots that make him, and others discover his gender identity. This revelation is laden with struggles of othering, tension within his family bonds, rejection from society, and tragic personal acceptance towards the end, culminating in suicide. The representation of hermaphroditism is seen via the hateful attitude of the society and projected with deeply negative stereotypes like such individuals are not part of the normal society and need to be ostracised, which even trans people perpetuate in this film like Champa (Sayaji Shinde) leader of Hijra group. Although D is based on Imi, he is caught in the story about his mother throughout the film, so his identity is suppressed for most of the film. The instance of sexual violence (gang rape) on Imi is a disturbing reality faced by different genders. An abandoned child whom Imi decides to bring up provides a semblance of relief to Imi for some time as Champa forces him to give up.

- Relationship: There are varied relationships throughout the film, some of which are supportive to the character and help Imi to navigate through life, while few, including the trans character Champa are repelling as these characters traumatise Imi from his childhood by revealing that he is a hermaphrodite and needs to leave the normal life. There is a sensitive and comforting bonding with Zeenat Begum (Kiron Kher), his mother, a film actress amidst volatile incidents in Imi's life, but she also is not accepting of his identity as she had never accepted that Imi

was her son, instead called him her brother. Imi's grandmother, his real father, and Tabu's character- an actress who replaces Zeenat are sympathetic to him.

Web Series: Sacred Games (2018) directed by Anurag Kashyap, Vikramaditya Motwane

- Transgender character and actor: 'Kukoo' performed by Kubra Sait.

- Representation: Kukoo is a complex character, and one of the main highlights is that a female actor performed such a role making it more interesting for the audience. This character is projected to challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes, but some critics have argued that her portrayal reinforces harmful tropes about transgender people as hyper-sexual objects. Certain stereotypes like these individuals are immoral and deviant that have been reinforced due to SG. Some have viewed the character as a negative and stereotypical character as she is a sex worker and a drug addict. The portrayal on one side presents Kukoo as a bold, strong person who talks about choice and desire but, on the other side, does not have agency as she falls in love with a mafia lead and thus becomes weak in the transaction.

- Relationships: An explicit, complex, and layered romantic relationship is depicted with a cisgender man,the protagonist' Gaitonde' (played by Nawazuddin Siddiqui) that evolves from an explicit and violent physical engagement to a deep emotional bond, where there is acceptance. She is not shown to have healthy relationships in the film, and her engagement has an element of pain. The relationship has remnants in Gaitonde's life even after Kukoo's death. She also had a previous connection with another mafia man, and a semblance of Kukoo being 'precious' to these men is part of the story. That was depicted as a shift from the stereotypical representation, but in the process, SG gets trapped in sexual stereotypes.

Film: Laxmi (2020) directed by Raghava Lawrence

- Transgender character and actor: Laxmi performed by Sharad Kelkar and Akshay Kumar.

- Representation: There is an expression of boldness and confidence. The character is that of a ghost who is confident and empowered but violent, fighting against discrimination and violence towards transgender individuals. The horror-comedy nature of the film contributes to its problematic representation as fear, violence, and effeminateness in Aasif's character are linked with the trans-community, thereby reinforcing the stereotypes of othering and abnormal beings. However, an element of positivity is that trans-subject is the central theme of L, and this portrayal challenges the other stereotype about transgender individuals that they are weak. The projection of actual Laxmi as a respectable and loving character is also a positive shift. Yet, some critics argue that the film could have given more screen time to Laxmi's perspective and experiences and that is visible from the 3-minute trailer itself, where Sharad, the actual trans character is completely absent and only the sensational and cross-dressing representation is used. Akshay Kumar's commercial presence and transvestitism theme makes the subject non-serious in its appeal. The character is not addicted to any substance.

- Relationships: The actual Laxmi, played by Sharad Kelkar, is the back story of L that involves a transgender character who is disowned by her family but gets support and acceptance from an old man Abdul Chacha. This relationship normalises Laxmi's human bonding. She adopts a trans girl named Geeta and provides her care and education. This shows the affectionate and sensitive side of this character who wants Geeta to become a doctor but gets killed due to a property fraud by the villains. The Laxmi, played by Akshay Kumar, is a result of being possessed by Sharad's ghost, who wants revenge on her

killers. Akshay's original character is Aasif, a cis-male character married to a woman (played by Kiara Advani). Laxmi's relationships are a reflection of earlier Laxmi.

Film: Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui (2021) directed by Abhishek Kapoor

◆ Transgender character and actor: Maanvi Brar, performed by Vaani Kapoor.

◆ Representation: There has been a mix of both interpretations, yet, the overall depiction suggests a positive connotation of a transgender individual, her sexuality, and her identity. This is the strongest representation in all the films as Maanvi has a nuanced representation and is portrayed as a confident and strong woman who is comfortable with her identity as a transgender person. This is the only film depicting the sex reassignment procedure as a sub-plot. Her relationship with the cis-male Manu grows organically in the film narrative as is normal with cis-characters. Additionally, the film includes a scene where Maanvi describes her journey and struggles, and she also stands up against discrimination and violence faced by the transgender community, which presents a positive representation of the community as a whole. The film raises awareness on the issue of gender identity, sex change, relationships and social acceptance of transsexual people. However, the film does include some stereotypical elements in its portrayal of Maanvi, such as her profession as a dancer and her flamboyant personality. However, these aspects are not over-emphasized or presented in a negative light.

◆ Relationships: Romantic relationship between Maanvi and Manu (played by Ayushmann Khurrana) is the central plot of CKA, and the screenplay follows the development of this relationship. It is a nuanced equation that begins with physical attraction and hypersexualization of the trans character to a pre-marital sexual engagement which the characters want to culminate into a

marriage but the relationship dynamics change with the revelation about Maanvi being a transwoman. After that, there is a heightened tension that resolves towards the climax with awareness and acceptance in Manu.

Film: Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022) directed by Sanjay Leela Bansali

◆ Transgender character and actor: Razia Bhai, performed by Vijay Raaz.

◆ Representation: This aspect of GK is one of the subplots which provides for the story development about the main lead, Gangubhai, to emerge as a powerful leader of the Kamathipura area. Although this character, Razia Bhai, has less screen time but a strong screen presence, her downfall becomes a source of iconic power for the protagonist. Razia Bhai has strong elements of physical and emotional depiction, but since she is shown as a negative brothel owner, she stereotypes the trans community as sex workers who are morally deviant and cunning individuals. The sense of agency comes from the subjugation of other characters, who fear her. This character aligns with the usual trans-portrayal in many films.

◆ Relationships: No explicit romantic relationships are depicted for this character. However, her political authority is shown vis-a-vis sex workers and sex traders. She has her followers in the Kamathipura area. Most of the women fear her. She has a unique transaction with Gangubhai, which spells an equation of equal status, power, ego, and repression till Gandubhai, confronts her and finally emerges as the president.

The researcher looked at films like Daayraa (1996), directed by Amol Palekar, which is critically acclaimed but involved sensitive handling of transvestitism. Although many films have transvestite references, they are not based on trans characters like Baaghi (1990), SholaAurShabnam (1992), Coolie No. 1 (1995), Chachi 420 (1997), Aunty No. 1 (1998), Sangharsh (1999), Kyaa Kool Hai Hum (2005),

Apna Sapna Money Money (2006), Dil Bole Hadippa! (2009),Golmaal Returns (2009, Murder 2 (2011), and Humshakals (2014), Dream Girl (2019 film), Radhe (2021 film), Ardh (2022). References to cross-dressing in media and films perpetuate stereotypes and lead to wrong perceptions about transgender individuals and usually have been for humour, sadism, and transphobia. Amma, a multilingual filmdirected by Faisal Saif having a reference to gender identity, has a transgender antagonist-played by Rajpal Yadav, is on hold after the director's death. The reference to trans identity has been based on the director's discussion with the renowned Bengali film maker Rituparno Ghosh.

Discussion

After conducting a content analysis of six Hindi films and web series featuring transgender characters and themes related to gender identity and sexuality, we can draw the following conclusions:

◆ Representation of transgender characters in Hindi films and web series is still limited and stereotypical. Most characters are portrayed as either sex workers like Razia Bhai in GK or Kukoo in SG or objects of ridicule like Tiku in T or Akshay's Laxmi in L, and their stories are often relegated to subplots like GK, S, very few instances like CKA, L, and SG are there, where the trans character and transsexuality had a central role in the protagonist's narrative.

◆ All the studied characters in the analyzed films and web series are Male-to-Female (MTF), and usually also, very few female-to-male (FTM) or non-binary characters are represented in genres or visible in society. In D, there is a lack of clarity as Imi keeps asserting that he was not among the eunuchs to be able to run away from the abuse as a Hijra.

◆ Cis-gender males have played most characters, and only in CKA as a rare instance, a female actor played the role, but a general

finding is that transgender actors are not cast, and as such stereotypical instances are there. Films like Kya Kool Hain Ham, where Bobby Darling, a trans, played the role, were mostly ridiculing and non-significant examples around that era. Hollywood also endorses the gender binary by promoting the idea with its casting of cisgender men in the roles of trans women[32] and since cisgender men cannot depict the true characteristics and the experiences of trans women, the idea reinforces that trans women are not women in reality. This portrayal can perpetuate negative stereotypes and stigmatisation of the transgender community as it lacks nuance and depth, reducing them to one-dimensional caricatures

◆ Romantic relationships of transgender characters are largely same-sex, like in SG, S, or non-traditional, with very few characters in heterosexual relationships. The humane side of relationships, which normalises the trans community's interaction with society, is less like Sharad's Laxmi in L and Tiku in S. CKA is a pioneer in many ways.

◆ CKA and SG stand out as a unique and focused representation of transgender characters, with both characters of Maanvi and Kukoo portrayed with depth and complexity and their story being an integral part of the narrative.

The transgender portrayal has not as per the regular media grammar or routine storytelling about the protagonist or central characters, as in their case, the element of 'othering' has been reflected all over the media content- news, advertisements, films, and now social media. The representatives of these communities often argue that they are not perceived as normal 'human beings'.

And associating transvestism and homosexuality is an enduring stereotype that is often invoked by the media, thereby reinforcing negative attitudes toward gender variance".

Conclusion

While tracing the evolution of trans representation in the entertainment industry, it can be said that Overall, these films and web series feature a diverse range of transgender characters, with most focusing on male-to-female identity, and as such female-to-male and other non-binary characters are absent from the cinematic representation. The romantic relationships depicted are mostly same-sex or opposite-sex, with no instances of poly amorous relationships. It can be stated that the overall representation of transgender characters varies across the films and web series, with few portraying transgender characters in a positive and nuanced manner while others reinforce harmful stereotypes. Despite their presence in every society, a general expectation from a film with a plot point concerning trans-experience is not to mainstream their lives or to provide a sense of legitimising them as a normal social order. Some stereotypes continue, and as said by Lippman [33] there is a direct role of this media framing on the 'images in our head' which shapes social perception and public opinion.

Further, the entire gender spectrum LGBTQ+ often gets synonymously used as the oversimplification or reductionist treatments play a role in representing what Zargar [34] calls an "ultra-minority" subgroup within the LGBTQIA+ community. So many films or OTT series like Fashion (2008), Student of The Year (2012), Margarita with a Straw (2014), Dedh Ishqiya (2014), and Made in Heaven (2019) have gay or lesbian references, and these need to be seen as representative of specific communities. Even transvestite characters may not be transexual, so a deeper understanding is needed even for portrayal. There is a need for greater representation and acceptance of transgender individuals in Indian cinema, with more nuanced and respectful portrayals of their stories and experiences for public literacy and awareness. The upcoming series Taali, with Sushmita Sen portraying the character of leading trans activist Gauri Shinde, is already

normalising cinema and media content about this community. Also, the first transgender-based reality show- Project Angels, was streamed on an Indian OTT platform- Mask TV in December 2022 but could not reach the popular discourse and viewership, but it can be one of the firsts.

These findings suggest that few positive steps towards greater representation of transgender characters in Hindi cinema are there, but promoting acceptance and understanding of gender identity and diversity is required. It is important to accurately represent and portray transgender characters in media rather than relying on stereotypes and misconceptions. Media representation can significantly impact societal attitudes and beliefs towards marginalised groups. Exposure to positive representations of transgender characters can increase acceptance and reduce prejudice toward the transgender community. Therefore, it is crucial for media to accurately and positively represent transgender characters and different aspects of their lives, and not stigmatise these people and their relationships. An ideal narrative would involve the stages of psychosexual development proposed by Freud (1905) [35], which can help increase understanding and acceptance of transgender individuals in society and tackle transphobia and stigmatization. The idea of self-perception in LGBTQIA+ individuals may also shape differently without trauma and stigma resulting from the cultural violence against these communities.

Conflict of interest: None

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