



The Changing Paradigm of the Portrayal of Women in OTT Platforms and the Silver Lining: Mediating Role of Freedom from Biases

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ABSTRACT

In recent times, the world has witnessed radical growth in over-the-top (OTT) platforms, and one major factor contributing to this growth is content that is more relevant, engaging, and contemporary. The present study aims at critically examining the changing portrayal of women by understanding the perspectives of OTT viewers. A conceptual model was developed and tested using primary data collected from 267 respondents using a structured questionnaire. The data analysis was done leveraging SPSS 22.0 and IBM AMOS 20.0. The proposed model was tested using first-order confirmatory factor analysis, followed by path analysis using structural equation modeling (SEM). The study reveals that creative freedom and global communication on women in OTT lead to a changing portrayal of women and women's empowerment. The study also confirms that freedom from bias mediates the changing portrayal of women in OTT for creative freedom and global conversation on womanhood, but does not have a mediating role in changing the portrayal of women in OTT for realistic, relatable content and women-led narration. The study is unique as it attempts to gauge OTT viewers' perspectives regarding the shift in OTT content and its contribution to gender equality and women's empowerment. There is a dearth of empirical studies conducted covering this area, specifically in the context of a developing country like India. Therefore, this study makes a significant contribution both in theoretical and practical aspects.

Keywords: Portrayal of Women, OTT platforms, Women Empowerment, Freedom from biases, Creative Freedom

1. INTRODUCTION

Mass media play a vital role in directly or indirectly influencing how we perceive the world around us. It plays "a vital part in shaping and re-shaping culture by selecting and projecting a particular way of life as reality, or instead as the only reality" (Sangra, 2021). Therefore, Enzensberger (1974) coined the term "The Consciousness Industry" to refer to institutions (such as mass media and education) that have the power to "manufacture realities and consent in society" (Sangra, 2021). Digital technologies and platforms as new digital powers are growing continuously (Jin, 2024), and smartphones have become an indispensable part of human lives,

making their lives easy and connected (He & Zeng, 2024). Interestingly, social media is becoming the primary source of information today, and "the likes of YouTube and Netflix are becoming numero uno when it comes to entertainment" (Thomas, 2021). The advent of Internet-enabled platforms has drastically changed the world of mass media. Internet-distributed videos, also referred to as Over-the-Top (OTT) or above, are examples of disruptions created in the audiovisual content market worldwide (Fitzgerald, 2019). The popularity of OTT services has also made them a lucrative market for advertisers. According to Statista (2026), the 'OTT video' segment of the media market is expected to increase by USD

123 billion between the year 2025 and 2030, which is more than 35.77 percent.

The popularity of OTT services and their growth can be attributed to multiple factors such as accessibility of the Internet, changing consumer behavior, the COVID-19 pandemic, which catalyzed digital adoption, preference of consumers for “bite-sized” entertainment, and instant availability of content. In addition, freedom of choice as well as the power to control has always been a deciding factor throughout television history that has culminated in the form of binge-watching today (Mikos & Castro, 2021). According to the well-known newspaper Times of India's habit index, OTT platforms have emerged as the reigning champion as “people from different walks of life, of varied ages, spend 39% of their screen time on OTT binge-watching movies and series” (Times of India, 2026). Another report titled “India's E&M growth rides its youth wave” by PwC's Global Entertainment and Media Outlook reveals that OTT will be the second-fastest-growing segment with revenues increasing from USD 2,277 million in 2024 to USD 3,479 million by 2029. The increase is driven by growth in regional content, subscription models, and global platform investments.

OTT has broader social and cultural implications that may positively or negatively affect individuals, families, and society. For example, content on the OTT platform is not bound by proper regulations and guidelines. Thus, it may hurt the religious sentiments of people, trigger hatred among racial groups, twist and turn facts to make them more interesting, and thus harm the peace of an individual or society. The report by DAN (Dentsu Aegis Network) highlighted that “Binge Watching as a culture is on the rise as a result of boredom in isolation” (ET Brand Equity, 2020), which is still relevant, especially in the context of Generation Z. However, there is also a silver lining in the OTT culture as it differs from traditional television content. The content in OTT is more relevant, engaging, and contemporary for present viewers. In addition, the stereotypical images of gender (both male and female) portrayed in traditional media have changed substantially. A study was conducted by Sangra (2021) to critically examine the representation of male characters in various Indian OTT platforms. The study

confirms that today's Indian OTT content presents a very different image from the “existing patriarchal male image” and thus contributes to gender equality in society.

The current study intends to critically inspect the changing portrayal of women on OTT platforms. The study attempts to understand the perspective of OTT viewers regarding the shift and whether OTT has contributed to women's empowerment.

1.1 Growth of OTT platforms in India

India has witnessed a sudden surge in the number of OTT platforms, subscribers, and advertising spending on OTT platforms (Valecha & Jaggi, 2023). This increase can be attributed to multiple factors such as digitalization, access to the Internet at low prices, a substantial youth viewer population, a wide range of content choices with international, national, and regional flavors, quality of original content, changing consumer behavior, disposable income, etc. The drop in prices and popularity of smartphones has also boosted the growth of OTT platforms in India. According to a study conducted by Deloitte (2022), India will have one billion smartphone users by the year 2026. The primary driver of this growth will come from rural India, where a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 6 percent will be witnessed compared to 2.5 percent growth in urban India from 2021 to 2026 (Business Standard, 2022). This phenomenal growth in smartphone owners will also enable a significant portion of the Indian population to access OTT platforms. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified OTT adoption and viewership in India (Sharma & Lulandala, 2023). The pandemic has created a novel in-home environment for entertainment consumption, leading to an increase in the number of direct-to-consumer apps, small-sized entertainment platforms, and content formats that users curate.

The Global Entertainment and Media Outlook 2026-30 report by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2026) states that India and China present interesting cases with reference to decentralization in the OTT space. In the Indian context, competition is dominated by domestic platforms that are more focused on local language content, Bollywood catalogues, and cricket rights. Ormax Media, a consulting firm

for the Indian media and entertainment industry, reported that India's OTT audience universe (i.e., those individuals who have watched digital videos at least once in the last month) was 601.2 million in 2025. This is a growth of 9.9% in comparison to 2024 (Ormax Media, 2025). As per the MICA's Indian OTT Platforms report- 2024, Indian content was primarily consumed by 1.41 billion people residing in India, while 32 million resided outside India. Also, the content is diverse with respect to platforms, language, scale, and linearity (MICA Indian OTT Platforms Report, 2024).

Indians' appetite for binge-watching online content has amplified the number of OTT platforms. Currently, more than 57 OTT players in India target different audiences in different languages. In addition, OTT service providers such as Amazon Prime, Netflix, and Disney+Hotstar are investing in creating or acquiring content that appeals to the target audience. Thus, the Indian media and entertainment landscape is witnessing a shift from traditional to digital platforms, where OTT platforms are playing an important role.

1.2 The Theory of Social Constructionism

Social Constructionism refers to multiple theoretical approaches "that challenge the underlying assumptions and research practices of mainstream psychology" (Burr, 2015). The key contributors to social constructionism were Berger and Luckmann, who argued that all forms of knowledge- even the most basic ones- are derived from social interactions that occur between individuals in a social system. In addition, when a pattern of behavior is repeatedly reproduced by individuals in society, it results in the formation of a new reality, which they refer to as the "social construction of reality" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In other words, if a particular idea, belief, or image is received or repeatedly performed, then over time society might alter that belief or idea.

The theory also highlights that attributes such as race, gender, and class, which are considered biological and therefore enduring, are the outcome of "human definition and interpretation" influenced and molded by cultural and historical contexts (Subramaniam, 2014). Thus, femininity, for example, not only includes a biological perspective but also

"society constructs these identities, along with developing a hierarchical structure between and within genders." In addition, institutions such as schools, mass media, families, and social groups socialize individuals to select patterns of behavior deemed fit (Bandura, 1977). Interestingly, all of these attribute definitions change or are reproduced over time. Thus, the "social constructionist perspective is concerned with the meaning created by defining and categorizing groups of people, experience, and reality in cultural contexts" (Kang et al., 2017).

Mass Media play a dynamic role in scripting and molding the thought process of society. The content delivered by mass media reflects various aspects of society and projects specific ways of life as the truth or the only truth prevailing in society. According to Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976), "as societies grow more complex, and as the quality of media technology improves, the media continuously take on more and more unique information functions." Today, mass media are dominated by contemporary media platforms, such as social media and OTT, which have disrupted the audiovisual content market worldwide. Content delivered on these platforms directly or indirectly affects individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions.

1.3 Research Gap and Research Questions

OTT services are growing rapidly and, therefore, demand more exploration to advance the theoretical perspective (Khanna et al., 2025). The OTT landscape in India is shaped largely by the presence of a younger population. However, binge watching, the quality of the content, and continuity are important factors that influence the choice of Indian audiences for OTT (Moochhala, 2018). According to Sadana and Sharma (2021), consumers' choices concerning entertainment in India are influenced by five factors: content and viewing behavior, expenses on services, offerings or incentives, convenience, and telecom. Nagaraj et al. (2021) conducted a similar study to understand the key reasons for subscribing to and not subscribing to OTT platforms. Interestingly, peer influence was revealed to play a major role in consumers opting for OTT subscriptions, while the adverse effect of OTT platforms (e.g., binge watching) was found to be the key reason quoted by non-subscribers. The diversity and

availability of Indian regional content on the OTT platforms have also boosted the growth story of these platforms in India (Dhiman, 2023). Chakraborty et al. (2022) conducted a study to understand Indian consumers' inclination towards new OTT media platform services. The study revealed that viewers expressively favor live broadcasting services that also embrace regional content. With reference to subscription, free OTT Media Platforms are more popular, although paid users are more interested in new OTT Media Platforms and can trade off their subscribed services.

Past research has also highlighted other aspects related to OTT in the Indian context, such as OTT's evolution and future (Peeke & Banana, 2021; Gupta, 2021; Sundaravel & Elangovan, 2020; Fitzgerald, 2019); COVID 19, and its impact on OTT platforms in India (Madnani et al., 2020), behavioral intention of consumers towards OTT acceptance (Maleawar & Bajaj, 2020), watching habits and perception of viewers (Singh, 2019), psychological and emotional antecedents underlying OTT binge-watching amid Generation Z (Bakshi, 2025), attitude towards advertising on OTT platforms (Valecha & Jaggi, 2023), variables effecting consumers' adoption of OTT services (Shri et al., 2021) and specific dynamics of OTT platform growth and media imperialism (Fitzgerald, 2019) and so on. The portrayal of females in OTT has also been discussed by a few researchers. However, most are either descriptive (Sharma, 2021) or qualitative in nature (Arya, 2023; Kanwar & Singh, 2021). Few researchers have tried collecting data; however, their study lacks strong empirical methodology and statistical analysis (Agarwal & De Das, 2022). A study conducted by Sangra (2021) examined the content of Indian OTT platforms to understand masculinity representation on these platforms. However, the study tries to comprehend how the OTT content in India is "blurring images of masculinity instead of what the cultural products are portraying."

Interestingly, none of the above studies gauge the changing portrayal of Indian women on OTT platforms or its impact on women's empowerment. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no study has attempted to gauge the perspective of OTT viewers about the shift in content and whether OTT has contributed to

gender parity and women's empowerment. Thus, there exist a need to address this gap, especially in the Indian context, due to changes in consumer behavior, evolving viewer expectations, and altered viewer sensitivity. The same is also revealed in the findings of the Streamers Survey 2024 conducted by Moloco, an operational machine learning (ML) and performance advertising company, in collaboration with YouGov, an independent research company. According to the findings, consumer behavior is shifting as more people are moving from traditional TV to streaming media platforms, predominantly on mobile devices. In addition, 78 percent of Indian consumers prefer watching personalized ads, which they refer to as being more persuasive and can result in a positive response (e.g., a purchase) (Brandwagon Online, 2024). This clearly depicts Indian consumers' preferences for on-demand and personalized content. In addition, the female viewership of OTT has increased, especially in semi-urban and urban India, making it important for platforms to push narratives that are more relatable to female audiences. The evolved expectations of viewers, such as demand for realism, authenticity, newness, and comparison with global content, have made it imperative to gauge the perspective of OTT users. Interestingly, feminist movements, such as #MeToo, and viewers' demand for more inclusive representation have also changed the perception of gender roles, which is worth exploring. Given these changes, a critical study that aids in uncovering viewer perceptions can provide detailed insight into how media shapes and reinforces evolving gender narratives in India. The above discussion led to the subsequent research questions and research objectives:

RQ1: What is the perspective of OTT viewers regarding the changing portrayal of Indian women on OTT platforms?

RQ2: Do OTT platforms contribute to women's empowerment?

RO1: To understand and analyze the perspective of OTT viewers regarding the changing portrayal of Indian women on OTT platforms.

RO2: To analyze the contribution of OTT platforms toward women's empowerment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

An in-depth review of literature was conducted to develop a theoretical conceptual model and

to propose hypotheses. The topic is very contemporary and, therefore, lacks sufficient literature. Empirical data are used to validate the proposed conceptual model. Interestingly, research converging solely on viewers' perceptions regarding the shift in OTT content and its impact on gender parity and women's empowerment is rare to find. Therefore, exploratory studies pertinent to the topic of interest were considered when developing the hypotheses.

2.1 Changing portrayal of women in OTT platforms

The onscreen portrayal of women in India has changed greatly in the last few years, from a domestic context and submissive image to a more professional and empowered representation (Barthwal, 2024). This change was gradual and subtle rather than radical and profound. Indian cinema and television have always presented a stereotypical image of Indian women where she is either objectified or portrayed as cultured, well-mannered, obedient, and a symbol of purity and perfection, which was widely accepted and appreciated (Sharma, 2021). According to Tripathy (2023), "women in Indian cinemas were largely shown as the ones whose hands would be tied, or ones who are only good at singing and dancing. Many top actresses have also often confessed that women's roles are usually limited in most movies as showpieces." However, with the cultural and social shift in Indian society, mass media have started showing real female characters and have drastically changed narratives. The dawn of OTT services and other streaming platforms has altered the pace of this change. OTT viewers and content creators have witnessed a radical shift in the onscreen portrayal of female protagonists and characters. According to Uniyal and Mirza (2024), OTT augments heterogeneity in our understanding of gender by producing novel forms of "presentation and representation", adding a gist of women empowerment and gender issues at large. This also applies to regional media OTT platforms (Banerjee et al., 2021).

Today, OTT platforms are flooded with female-centric content and depict characters that are more realistic. The most popular examples of women-centric content in some of the top OTT platforms in India are Delhi Crime, Masaba Masaba, She, Bombay Begums, Aranyak, The

Fame Game, Mimi, Pagglait, Bulbbul, Leila, and Darlings from Netflix. Similarly, some popular women-centric narrations on Amazon Prime Video include four more shots. Poacher, Made in Heaven, Pushpavalli, Laakhon Mein Ek, Sherni, Chhorii, Hush Hush, Disney+ Hotstar also has content like Arya, Human, and A Thursday, which present a strong and bold narrative of Indian women. All these contents have one commonality: they celebrate womanhood in its true form, whether it is their journey or struggle. Interestingly, they also focus on topics that mainstream media do not engage, such as LGBTQ topics and dysfunctional relationships. Web series have attempted to highlight gender distinctiveness, normalize sexuality, and showcase real stories of women (Sharma, 2021). For example, a web series on Amazon Prime Video titled "Four More Shots Please!" portrays the story of four women struggling with unique, challenging problems. These characters are friends, and they live their lives on their own conditions, make mistakes, learn from them, and have careers that flourish, fail, and struggle in their day-to-day lives. The narrative also highlights various characters and tries to break taboos (such as single motherhood and bisexuality) that still exist in Indian society related to women's roles and responsibilities. For instance, Umang Singh, a protagonist, is shown as a gym trainer who is bisexual, self-dependent, physically strong but emotionally weak—a character that is far from the traditional role of women as depicted in mass media. Similarly, another character, Anjana Menon, was depicted as an independent divorced single mother who is a dedicated lawyer by profession and leaves no stone unturned to balance her career and her role as a mother. This depiction is contradictory to the "docile, submissive, meek and vulnerable" representation of women in Indian traditional media (Kanwar and Singh, 2021). To conclude, the various female characters in the web series depict an enthralling story that scrutinizes gender dynamics in Indian society and poses various questions regarding the cultural expectations of women. Another example is the 2021 Netflix series Bombay Begums, which revolves around the four women from different walks of life and the status of life living in Mumbai. A common thread that connects them is their desire to grow and "a complex matrix of relationships, norms and ideas" (p. 106) they all have to navigate, and the varied nature of their

journeys and experiences that are shaped largely by the environments they function in (Menezes, 2021).

The OTT platform is not governed by any censorship, and therefore allows content creators to portray their creativity to the fullest and deliver contemporary content. A Comparative Analysis between Cinema and OTT Platforms by Arya (2023) revealed that when it comes to the “portrayal of homosexuals and homosexuality, OTT definitely has an edge over cinema’ (p.119). This is because Bollywood cinema is governed and must follow the strict laws and regulations laid by the censor board of India. However, such regulations are not applicable to OTT platforms, which makes them more realistic, relatable, and creative. The actors and narrator have the freedom to explore to the fullest, as demanded by the script. The content has also changed drastically and is fresher, edgier, and more relatable. The Indian cinema and film industry has not witnessed the kind of narratives delivered today (Roy, 2019). The content is more realistic and touches on various aspects of a layman’s life. According to Singh and Sapna (2023), the content on OTT platforms is uncensored and very realistic, where one finds the narrative, depiction, and dialogues close to the real world around oneself. Thus, enabling OTT content is more relatable to the masses.

With the above background, the following hypotheses are proposed by the researchers:

H1: Creative Freedom in OTT has led to the changing portrayal of women.

H2: OTT offers more realistic and relatable content and thus contributes to the changing portrayal of women.

The vast majority of the world’s population relies on media to enhance their consciousness and awareness, as well as for obtaining information and entertainment, making media an effective medium of change (Kanwar & Singh, 2021). Media are powerful agents that can produce, perpetuate, and destroy varied images or stereotypes, especially for women (Agarwal & De Das, 2022). Women have been a part of the entertainment industry since their inception. Unfortunately, the film and entertainment ecosystem has not been hospitable to them and, therefore, has always been a male-dominated industry in India as

well as globally (Joseph et al., 2017). With the advent of OTT, there is a shift, and women have been grabbing more opportunities than ever before. According to Mehta (2022), “With more female filmmakers, actors, and producers helming the creative fronts and financial budgets in the mainstream Hindi film industry, the female characters we see onscreen are no longer just accessories to the hero”. The same was reported by Bhargava (2022) and stated that, “With female filmmakers, writers, producers, and actors taking the lead, the narrative is changing, and female characters are now portrayed in a new light”. OTTs enables female storytellers to tell assorted stories on issues related to women, or have women as a focal point. Also, OTT provides an opportunity to distinctly portray the lives and struggles of marginalized women (Mukherjee & Khan, 2025) as well as to take up female-centric content that is breaking stereotypes and raising mindfulness related to gender (Mishra, 2026). Thus, OTT has provided women with the opportunity to narrate stories of women from women’s perspectives and to portray them onscreen with a female protagonist. Women-led narration, in which women play a vital role in front of and behind the screen, has contributed to the changing portrayal of women.

Thus, it can be hypothesized that:

H3: Women-led narrations in OTT have led to the changing portrayal of women.

While there is no doubt that OTT has become the catalyst in changing the portrayal of women in the Indian context, the broader social movements such as "Me Too" and "HeForShe," which started around the world, have also influenced the onscreen portrayal of female protagonists and characters. These movements brought issues related to women to the center stage and initiated a global dialogue on womanhood. Interestingly, social movements like “MeToo” which are associated with large societal changes have also personal implications. For example, Levy and Mattsson (2023) reported a significant increase in reporting of crimes of sex after the MeToo movement, thus affecting the high-stakes personal decisions of individuals. The availability of online platforms such as social media has also helped disseminate these social movements across geographical boundaries (Brünker, 2020). Few researchers have advocated leveraging digital media for

progressive feminism (Coleman, 2015). Feminists should take advantage of opportunities on social media such as “openness, collaboration, and networking to increase participation while being critical of the ecologies in which they exist” (Ott, 2018). Global communication on women’s issues and gender equality has subsequently led to strong onscreen female characters. This led us to hypothesize as follows:

H4: Global communication on women has led to a changing portrayal of women in OTT platforms.

2.2 Changing portrayal of women in OTT and Women Empowerment

“Entertainment and Media are among the most immediate and impactful ways to influence our views on societal norms. They have the power to eradicate intersectional gender inequality in our global cultures. If our audiences can see themselves positively portrayed on screen, it can reinforce the message that they matter. It can also influence their long-term views throughout their lives.” Madeline Di Nonno (2017)

The mass media mirrors society and has several social and cultural implications. The popularity and growth have changed users' content consumption behavior. The OTT platform has also brought about a flood of women-centric shows. Women-centric shows are either inspired by real-life stories or fiction based on real social issues related to women. However, these shows “present confident, strong, and empowered women who celebrate their victories and don’t give in to the struggles” (Kaur, 2021). The changing portrayal of women helps break the gender-biased roles that are rooted deeply in the minds of Indian society and may lead to a positive change in the behavior and outlook of the people, as these are very influential as well as transcendent (Agarwal & De Das, 2022). In addition, past studies have noted the cultural shift caused by OTT services. According to Thomas et al. (2022), there is a noteworthy association between content consumption process from OTT platforms and forming novel cultural norms.

According to the theory of social constructivism, if a similar type of content/behavior is repeated constantly, it may result in the formation of new or altered existing belief systems, attitudes, and perceptions. Present-day OTT platforms have

abundant content, showing different representations of Indian women. Women today are shown as strong and independent female characters rather than as victims of society, family, or unfortunate events. OTT is filled with narration and content that is women-centric and women-led. Repetition of such content leads to a changing portrayal of Indian women and a shift in society's perceptions, leading to women's empowerment at large. Adding to this, the growing representation of women, especially in Indian cinema, draws from a greater cultural change to acknowledge the agency and the complexity of women (Akhtar & Rasul, 2025). Thus, the researchers opined the following:

H5: The changed portrayal of women on OTT platforms has led to women’s empowerment.

2.3 Freedom from biases in OTT platforms

OTT platforms have the potential to democratize the creation as well as delivery of content. OTT enables content producers with a direct path towards global audiences without the requirement of conventional mediators (Bhattacharya, 2024). It also provides scope for experimentation with novel content that has diverse stories and narratives with offbeat characters that are powerful in breaking stereotypes. Stereotypes may be associated with gender, norms of society, culture, etc. OTT provides the freedom to think beyond the conventional storyline and characters. This allows content creators to present narratives that may not have room for bias, prejudice, and prepossession. According to Roy (2019), OTT is free from gender bias, where a limited number of adjectives do not represent a particular gender. In addition, OTT is not only about having a woman play a lead role. It is also about content that is very diverse from traditional content and portrays women from different areas of life. Thus, the characters seem more relatable and realistic to viewers. The OTT platform enables women to narrate their stories from their perspectives. Women play vital roles onstage and offstage, narrating their stories the way they want, thus leaving no room for any gender bias. Freedom from bias has specific social implications. Women have become more vocal about their rights and social equality. This has escalated global dialogue on issues related to gender inequality, gender-based violence, and social-political movements/ideologies, such as feminism.

Thus, we hypothesize as follows:

H6: Freedom from biases has a mediating role in changing the portrayal of women in OTT and creative freedom.

H7: Freedom from biases has a mediating role in changing the portrayal of women in OTT and realistic and relatable content.

H8: Freedom from biases has a mediating role in changing the portrayal of women in OTT and women-led content.

H9: Freedom from biases has a mediating role in changing the portrayal of women in OTT and the global conversation on womanhood.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Conceptual Model

The following conceptual model (Figure 1) was proposed based on the previous discussion. The model was further tested using empirical data collected using a self-designed questionnaire.

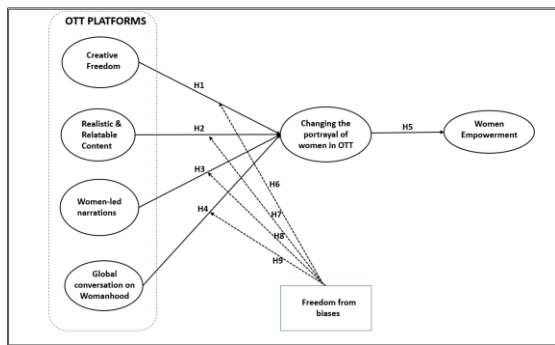


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for the study (Source: Authors Own)

3.2 Survey Instrument and Data Collection

The conceptual model (Figure 1) was empirically validated by collecting primary data via a self-designed questionnaire (Annexure-A). The six constructs and one mediating variable of the study were measured using items in the questionnaire. A total of 24 items were designed, and Likert's agreement scale was used, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

The present study used convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, to collect data via Google Forms. A total of 267 responses were received, and SPSS 22.0 and IBM AMOS 20.0 were used for data analysis. Excel was used for preliminary coding of the data, and SPSS was later used for testing. The inferences were drawn from the results of data analysis. The respondents for the study were

generally in the age group of 18-60, and the data were collected between December 2024 and April 2025. The respondents in the study were not limited to one geographical region in India and belonged to different parts of India. Table 1 depicts the description of the study sample.

Table 1: Demographics Table

Factors	Category	Frequency	Percent
Age Group	Below 18 years	21	7.9
	18-30	103	38.5
	30-45	87	32.6
	45-60	56	20.9
Occupation	Student	114	42.7
	Working professional	43	16.1
	Business	32	11.9
	Housewife	78	29.3
Income (in lacs)	Less than 1	154	59.7
	1-5	49	18.3
	Greater than 5	64	23.9
How often do you watch web series on OTT?	On daily basis	133	49.8
	2-3 Times a week	67	25.1
	4-5 Times a week	49	18.3
	Rarely	18	6.7
Total		267	

(Source: Compiled by Authors)

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

4.1 Measurement Model

The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) resulted in model fit indices (Figure 2), which are presented in Table 2. These values were within the acceptable range (Hair et al., 2010). The indices that were used to check goodness of fit were Chi-square/degree of Freedom (CMIN/DF), comparative fit index (CFI), and Tucker Lewis index (TLI). For the badness of fit, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) was used. All values are within the acceptable range; therefore, it can be stated that the proposed model is suitable for further testing.

Table 2: Measurement Model fit indices

Index	Value obtained	Suggested Range	Model fit
CMIN/DF	1.545	< 3	Good fit
CFI	0.934	> 0.9	Good fit
TLI	0.922	> 0.9	Good fit
RMSEA	0.073	< 0.1	Good fit

(Source: Compiled by Authors)

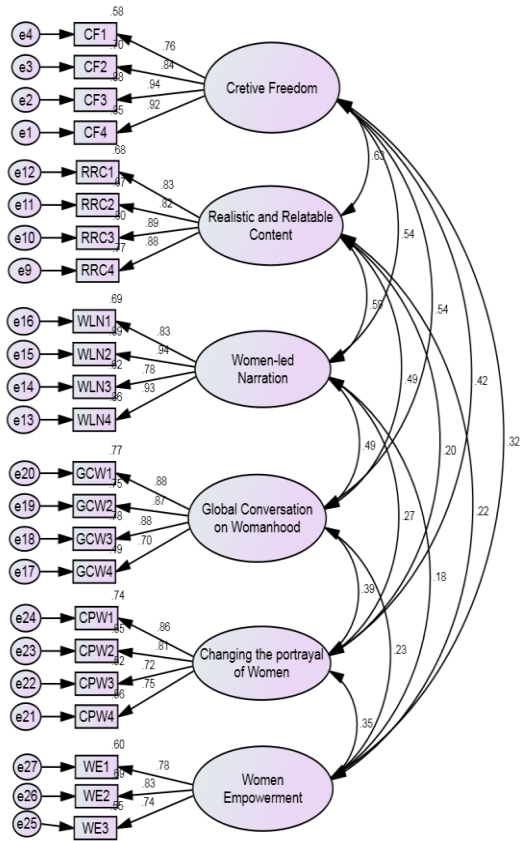


Figure 2: Confirmatory Factor Analysis

4.2 Reliability and Validity Concerns

Cronbach's alpha (CA) is leveraged to check reliability and should be more than 0.70 for all constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha value was 0.83 for 23 items. This value can be considered good as it is greater than 0.70, representing scales high internal consistency. For content validity, the opinions of two experts in the field were sought and incorporated during the model and questionnaire design, addressing and meeting content validity issues. Additionally, a rigorous literature review was conducted to develop a conceptual model. Convergent and discriminant validity were used to achieve construct validity, as shown in Tables 3 and 4, respectively. For convergent validity, the value of construct reliability (CR) should be > 0.7 , the Average Variance Explained (AVE) should be > 0.5 , and $CR > AVE$ (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). For discriminant validity, $AVE > MSV$, where MSV represents maximum shared variance. Hence, it can be specified that convergent validity and discriminant validity are attained for the model, and further analysis via Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) can be conducted.

Table 3: Measurement model (for reliability, convergent validity)

Constructs	Items loadings (k)	AVE	CR	ASV
Creative Freedom (CF)				
CF1	0.76	0.753	0.924	0.240
CF2	0.84			
CF3	0.94			
CF4	0.92			
Realistic and Relatable Content (RRC)				
RRC1	0.83	0.732	0.916	0.181
RRC2	0.82			
RRC3	0.89			
RRC4	0.88			
Women-led Narration (WLN)				
WLN1	0.83	0.761	0.927	0.171
WLN2	0.94			
WLN3	0.78			
WLN4	0.93			
Global Conversation on Womanhood (GCW)				
GCW1	0.88	0.699	0.902	0.183
GCW2	0.87			
GCW3	0.88			
GCW4	0.70			
Changing the portrayal of Women (CPW)				
CPW1	0.86	0.619	0.866	0.106
CPW2	0.81			
CPW3	0.72			
CPW4	0.75			
Women Empowerment (WE)				
WE1	0.78	0.615	0.827	0.068
WE2	0.83			
WE3	0.74			

(Source: Compiled by Authors)

Table 4: Correlation matrix and roots of AVEs for discriminant validity

	MSV	MaxR (H)	WE	CF	RRC	WLN	GCW	CPW
Women Empowerment (WE)	0.123	0.832	0.783					
Creative Freedom (CF)	0.398	0.943	0.322	0.867				
Realistic and Reliable Content (RRC)	0.398	0.920	0.219	0.631	0.855			
Women-led Narration (WLN)	0.348	0.948	0.179	0.541	0.590	0.874		
Global Conversation on Womanhood (GCW)	0.292	0.916	0.231	0.540	0.494	0.489	0.835	
Changing the portrayal of Women (CPW)	0.173	0.876	0.351	0.416	0.196	0.273	0.388	0.785

(Source: Compiled by Authors)

Note: Off-diagonal values represent correlations among constructs.

4.3 Path analysis via Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)

For all constructs, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted collectively as depicted in Figure 3. SEM is the application of multiple regressions to the proposed model according to the relationship between the constructs. Table 5 presents the outcomes for the regression weights and their significance, along with the research hypotheses and acceptance or rejection.

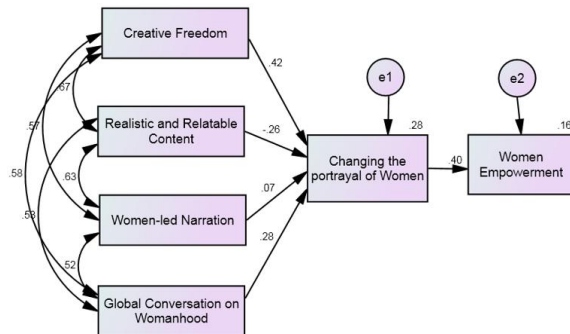


Figure 3: Path analysis via SEM

Table 5: Hypotheses testing via SEM

Hypothesis	Regression Coefficient (R2)	Sig. (P value)	Hypothesis Accepted/ Rejected
H1: Creative Freedom in OTT has led to the changing portrayal of women.	0.42	.000	Accepted
H2: OTT offers more realistic and relatable content and thus contributes to the changing portrayal of women.	-0.26	0.057	Rejected
H3: Women-led narrations in OTT have led to the changing portrayal of women.	0.27	0.528	Rejected
H4: Global communication on women has led to the changing portrayal of women in OTT platforms.	0.28	.009	Accepted
H5: The changed portrayal of women in OTT platforms has led to women's empowerment.	0.40	.000	Accepted

(Source: Compiled by Authors)

Table 5 shows that hypotheses H1, H4, and H5 were accepted. Two hypotheses (H2 and H3) were rejected, as they were not significant. This leads to the interpretation that creative Freedom in OTT services leads to a changing portrayal of women. In addition, global communication on women has led to a changing portrayal of women on OTT platforms. Furthermore, the changed portrayal

of women on OTT platforms leads to women's empowerment.

4.4 Mediating effect of 'Freedom from biases'

The mediating role of a categorical variable, namely 'freedom from bias', is analyzed between the varied variables of the proposed model. Four hypotheses (H6, H7, H8, and H9) were tested for the mediating role of freedom from biases. A regression analysis was carried out using SPSS 22.0 on a split dataset. The Z test was carried out for the variable 'freedom from biases,' which is recorded as 'yes' for those who agree that OTT provides freedom from biases for gender issues, and 'no' for others. The obtained 'Z' value was compared with the standard value for acceptance or rejection. H0: $b_{Yes} = b_{No}$, where the decision rule is if $Z < 1.96$; hypothesis H0 is accepted, which is that there is no difference. Table 6 presents the results of these tests. The results column represents testing of the respective hypotheses.

Table 6: The mediating role of Freedom from Biases

Hypothesis and the mediating effect of Freedom from Biases (Yes: 178, No: 89)	B (Yes)	B (No)	Standard Error (Yes)	Standard Error (No)	Z-Value	Result
H6: Freedom from biases has a mediating role in changing the portrayal of women in OTT and creative freedom.	0.164	0.578	0.161	0.123	2.043	Accepted
H7: Freedom from biases has a mediating role in changing the portrayal of women in OTT and realistic and relatable content.	-0.145	-0.216	0.166	0.120	0.347	Rejected
H8: Freedom from biases has a mediating role in changing the portrayal of women in OTT and women-led Narration	0.159	-0.038	0.139	0.118	1.080	Rejected
H9: Freedom from biases has a mediating role in changing the portrayal of women in OTT and global conversation on womanhood.	0.174	0.692	0.189	0.153	2.130	Accepted

(Source: Compiled by Authors)

It can be seen that H6 and H9 are accepted, which means that the freedom from biases mediates the changing portrayal of women in OTT for creative freedom and global conversation on womanhood. Hypotheses H7 and H8 are rejected, which leads to the interpretation that freedom from bias does not have a mediating role in changing the portrayal of women in OTT for realistic, relatable content and women-led narration.

5. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

The landscape of communication and entertainment has been revolutionized due to the advancement of the internet and internet-enabled platforms. In India, platforms such as OTT have now become synonym to entertainment, which is demonstrated by the drastic growth in OTT platform numbers as well as the number of subscribers. These platforms are transforming the way audiences' access and consume content. Multiple factors, such as a drop in prices and popularity of smartphones, digitalization, access to the Internet at low prices, a substantial youth viewer population, changing consumer behavior, as well as the contemporary, relevant, and interesting content, contribute to this growth narrative. Additionally, OTT presents content that portrays a modern, contemporary, and bold image of Indian women compared to the traditional stereotyped image of Indian women as cultured, well-mannered, and obedient. The change in the portrayal of women in media plays a vital role in changing the perceptions of society at large related to gender and their roles. The present study aims to critically examine the changing portrayal of Indian women on OTT platforms. This study attempts to understand the perspective of OTT viewers regarding the shift and whether OTT has contributed to women's empowerment.

The empirical evidence reveals that OTT empowers content creators to portray their creativity and offers them creative freedom. Content creators create contemporary, edgy, and fresh content. This has also promoted content where women are portrayed as empowered and different from their traditional roles, leading to a changing portrayal of women in the media and society. However, the empirical evidence of the study also reveals that respondents do not perceive the content as realistic and relatable to the masses. With the

advent of OTT platforms, an increasing number of women have received opportunities to narrate stories of women from their perspectives and portray them onscreen as female protagonists.

Interestingly, the present study reveals that women-led narration, where women play a vital role in front of and behind the screen, has not contributed significantly to the changing portrayal of women. However, the broader social movements such as "Me Too" and "HeForShe," which started around the world, have brought the issues related to women to center stage and initiated a global dialogue on womanhood. Global communication on women's issues and gender equality has subsequently led to strong female characters onscreen and, as confirmed by the present study's results, has changed the portrayal of women on OTT platforms.

In recent years, the mass media have broken free from the traditional prejudices of women's portrayal and presented women with varied roles and representations. Women are portrayed as strong, resilient, and independent characters rather than as victims of society, family, or unfortunate events. Today, OTT as well as other internet-enabled platforms are flooded with content that is women-centric. Constant exposure to such content has an impact at the societal level, changing the perception related to women and their role in society. The change in perception at the societal level contributes to women's empowerment at large. This is also reinforced by empirical evidence of the present study.

The study also attempted to elucidate the mediating effect of the 'Freedom of Biases' between various variables of the proposed conceptual model. OTT platforms provide a scope for experimentation and present novel content with offbeat characters and storylines. Additionally, it provides an avenue for breaking stereotypes. It empowers and enables content creators to think out of the box and present narratives that may be different from traditional content and portray women from different areas of life. This leads to freedom from bias, which has vital social implications. Worldwide, women have become more vocal about their rights and equality in society, which has escalated the global dialogue on gender inequality, gender-based violence, and social-

political movements/ideologies such as feminism. The results of the present study reveal that freedom from bias has a mediating role in changing the portrayal of women in OTT for creative freedom and global conversation on womanhood. However, freedom from bias does not play a mediating role in changing the portrayal of women in OTT for realistic, relatable, and women-led content.

6. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study also has important theoretical and practical implications for various stakeholders. The key implications of this study are as follows:

6.1 Theoretical implications of the study: Theoretically, the present study contributes to the knowledge structure related to the changing portrayal of women in society via OTT platforms. It offers a novel perspective to feminist media theory by investigating how the consumption of women-centric content forms an understanding of gender roles and power dynamics in individuals, especially in the Indian context. This study offers interesting insights into the changing mass media consumption behavior of Indian consumers with the advent of OTT platforms. Mass media play a vital role in changing the perception of individuals in society, which also delineates their responsibility. This study has sociocultural implications. This highlights the role of the OTT platform in breaking gender stereotypes and enhancing gender sensitivity and empowerment. The emergence of strong female aspirational figures can have psychological and behavioral implications for young girls and women in society, influencing their confidence levels, motivation, career choices, and need for independence. Evolving Indian societal values and changing family dynamics provide interesting avenues for cultural reflection and change.

6.2 Practical implications of the study: The study offers practical implications for content creators, industry practitioners, and policymakers. Content creators, such as online streaming services, video-on-demand services, and other entertainment content producers, should understand the vital role of content in viewers' engagement and retention. Content is at the center of any entertainment and media business, and thus has to be engaging, fresh, and appealing to the audience. However, the

content must be chosen with due diligence. Content creators must pay attention to what they are serving their audience. In other words, they must be cautious and vigilant when presenting content, as this may lead to broader social and cultural implications. Industry practitioners and policymakers can play a vital role in influencing content- and policy-related guidelines. They can focus attention towards the more inclusive and responsible portrayal of women in any content and foster dialogue for gender sensitivity and gender equality both on- and off-screen.

7. LIMITATION AND FUTURE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The researcher approached the research topic with rigorous and extensive efforts. However, this study had several limitations. First, the respondents in the present study were a mix of respondents from different age groups in India. The study results are derived from a mix of population representatives and are not age- or demographic-specific. Therefore, the results may vary if a similar study is performed, taking into consideration a specific part of the population. Similar research can be undertaken using representatives from different age groups or demographics, providing an exciting avenue for future research.

Second, the primary data collected depended on the understanding and perspectives of the study respondents. Therefore, the study was restricted to the extent of OTT platform use, the type of content consumed, and the perceptions of the respondents.

Third, respondents were from India only; thus, the finding may or may not apply to respondents from other parts of the world. This also provides the scope for conducting similar studies in other parts of the world with a larger sample of respondents to test the model, validate the results, and include respondents from different geographical regions.

In other words, this study opens up future avenues for conducting comparative research. The comparison can be a cross-cultural understanding of the perception of viewers/users related to OTT and various dimensions, or can be related to the comparison of content (e.g., Netflix US vs. Netflix India). This study also encourages future researchers to conduct longitudinal studies to understand

the long-term shift in gender portrayals and narratives.

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Survey Instrument (Questionnaire)

Construct (Source)
1. Creative Freedom (CF)
CF1: I find the content in OTT very creative.
CF2: OTT platforms allow content creators to fully portray their creativity.
CF3: In OTT platforms, the actors have the freedom to experiment with the role he or she is playing.
CF4: In OTT platforms, the story's narrator has the creative freedom to explore the narrative to the fullest.
2. Realistic and Relatable Content (RRC)
RRC1: The content in OTT is so fresh and captivating that I often lose track of time.
RRC2: I think OTT platforms deliver content that is contemporary and edgy.
RRC3: I feel the content delivered in OTT is somewhat relatable to my own life or the people around me.
RRC4: I think the content I watch in OTT is more practical and realistic.
3. Women-led Narration (WLN)
WLN1: I firmly believe that OTT provides women an opportunity to narrate stories of their own.
WLN2: I have recently observed an abundance of women-centric content in OTT.
WLN3: I think the narratives are changing, and female characters are now being portrayed in a new light.
WLN4: I have observed women playing a vital role in front of the camera as well as behind the screen of the camera.
4. Global Conversation on Womanhood (GCW)
GCW1: I am aware of a few women-centric movements such as "Me Too" happening across the globe.
GCW2: I can find an enormous amount of information on women-related issues on the internet and social media platforms.
GCW3: I firmly believe that the women-centric movements (such as MeToo) brought the issues related to women to center stage and initiated a global dialogue on womanhood.
GCW4: I think that the global communication on women's issues and gender equality subsequently has led to strong female characters onscreen.
5. Changing the portrayal of Women (CPW)
CPW1: OTT platform has brought a lot of women-centric shows.
CPW2: OTT is filled with narration and content that are women-led.
CPW3: OTT platforms have abundant content showing a different representation of Indian women.
CPW4: The women-centric shows are either inspired by real-life stories or are fictions that are based on real social issues related to women.
6. Women Empowerment (WE)
WE1: OTT platforms present confident, strong, and empowered women.
WE2: OTT has changed the portrayal of Indian women from traditional to 21st-century women.
WE3: OTT has shifted the perception of society and has contributed to women's empowerment
7. Freedom from Biases (FB)
FB: OTT provides freedom to content creators to present narratives which may not have any room for biases related to gender.
1: Yes 2: No