

***Digitalization, New Media & OTT:
Case Study of Ushering New Perspectives for Gender Issues***

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Abstract

Technological and digital innovations are of huge significance in contemporary scenarios. From the digitalization of business models and governance to its impact on the everyday lives of common people, digital is also the driver of the fourth industrial revolution. The rise of virtual realities, Web3, and artificial intelligence has led to new challenges and opportunities. The way the masses consume entertainment and the rise of over-the-top (OTT) platforms are hallmarks of it. Further, media forms an integral part of portrayal, depiction, and features, which leads to stereotypes, biases, and exclusion. A boom in smartphones and high-speed internet also raises concerns about regulatory requirements for OTT platforms. OTT platforms navigate exponential growth and create an entertainment ecosystem, leading to innovative ideas. Debates on social norms and identities have often arisen from OTT content. This becomes a counternarrative to the follies of mainstream perspectives. OTT content is driven by the idea of a strong woman, challenging stereotypes, and calling out the social gendered dynamics. OTT adds heterogeneity to our understanding of gender. In a demand-driven world, this creates new forms of presentation and representation, adding a tenor of empowerment for women and gender issues at large. The paper attempts to discuss how, amidst the evolving nature of OTT platforms, they have been able to garner new perspectives on gender issues. It also discusses case studies from OTT platforms to highlight the significance of consistent engagement with gender issues, which is beneficial for holistic development too.

Keywords: Digitalization, New Media, OTT, Gender Issues

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Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of communication and media, the evolution of new media platforms has transformed the way we disseminate, consume and interact with information. The advent of digital technologies has revolutionised communication channels, facilitating instantaneous and widespread dissemination of content across the globe. One significant development in this digital era is the rise of Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms, which have reshaped the media and entertainment industry by offering on-demand content delivery directly to consumers over the internet, bypassing traditional distribution channels.

The proliferation of OTT platforms marks a significant paradigm shift in the world of digitalization, presenting new opportunities and challenges for media producers, consumers, and regulators alike. OTT platforms encompass a diverse array of services, ranging from streaming media services like Netflix, Hulu, Prime Video, and Disney+ to audio streaming platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music. These platforms leverage the ubiquity of internet connectivity and the increasing prevalence of smart devices to provide users with unprecedented access to a vast library of content anytime, anywhere.

The significance of OTT platforms lies in their ability to democratise content creation and distribution, empowering content creators with a direct route to global audiences without the need for traditional intermediaries. By circumventing traditional gatekeepers such as television networks, film studios, or any kind of censorship, OTT platforms offer a level playing field for independent filmmakers, artists, and storytellers to showcase their work and connect with audiences on a global scale. This democratization of content creation has led to the amplification of diverse voices and narratives, fostering creativity, innovation and cultural exchange in the digital media landscape.

Gender Issues in Traditional Media

Gender representation in traditional media (TV, radio, newspapers, Movies and Theatre) is often underrepresented. In movies, female characters are frequently portrayed in stereotypical roles, such as caregivers or in romantic subplots, while male characters often occupy positions of power and action. IBM Research, India, Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology (IIIT) Delhi, and Delhi Technological University (DTU) wrote a research paper by analysing 4000 Bollywood Films. The paper refers to the fact that Bollywood never portrayed women as independent entities and they have always been associated with successful men. But in the case of men the approach is different as they are portrayed independent and to be successful (Madaan et al., 2018). It is not like that Bollywood has never made films on women-centric subjects in the past. But whenever they were made, they were either seen fostering the stereotype or whenever they tried to break this stereotype, they had to face strong opposition and obstacles. For example, in the 90s, the first Indian film made on a homosexual relationship, Deepa Mehta's *Fire*, was very controversial. *Water* is another Deepa Mehta film which created a lot of controversy due to its deep insight on the life of an Indian widow. The screenplay of the film, centred in an ashram in Varanasi, was written by none other than Anurag Kashyap and it raised controversial issues like exclusion and misogyny, which were alien to the Indian Censor Board at that time. No wonder that in 2000, protestors widely opposed when Deepa Mehta started to shoot her film *Water* in Varanasi. The film set was destroyed and the city was shut down in protest against the misrepresentation of widows. Under these circumstances, Mehta was forced to leave the shooting in Varanasi. Later, she secretly shot her film in Sri Lanka (Razdan, 2007).

Even statistics of Hollywood show no much different results. For example, the University of Southern California (USC) report, Feb 2023, discovered that 34.6 percent speaking roles of the top 100 box-office hits of 2022 were female (Neff, Smith, & Pieper, 2023). The report ‘The Celluloid Ceiling’ published by the Centre for the Study of Women in Television & Films of San Diego State University and written by Dr. Martha M. Lauzen investigated the actual state of women in the top-grossing US films in 2023, and reported that the percentage of women working in the top 100 films dropped by 1% point, from 22% in 2022 to 21% in 2023. It said that 14% of the directors of the top 100 films of 2022 were women, which dropped by 3% point to 11% in 2023 (Lauzen, 2024). The gender pay gap persists in Hollywood. It is revealed by data examined from 1980 to 2015, that between male and female actors there is an unexplained wage difference of 25% (Park, 2022).

Shift With New Media and OTT

OTT platforms have catalysed new developments in media consumption habits, challenging the dominance of linear television and traditional cinema. As reported by the Times of India in its news report, India's OTT market has grown by 20% in recent years due to high-speed internet access and affordable subscription prices. As a result, India currently has over 42 crore viewers and 12 crore active paid OTT subscriptions (Masand, 2023). Similarly, in the USA according to Nielsen July 2023 data, the high volume of viewing overall increased streaming’s proportion of TV to 38.7%, setting a new record. Prime Video, Netflix, and YouTube all reached record highs. At 20% of TV viewing for the month, total broadcast viewing was down 3.6% overall, setting a record low. The use of broadcasts decreased by 5.4% every year, the survey found (Neilson survey data, 2023).

The rise of on-demand streaming has given viewers unprecedented control over their viewing experience, enabling binge-watching of entire seasons, personalised content recommendations, and flexible viewing schedules. This shift towards on-demand viewing has reshaped audience expectations and preferences, prompting traditional media companies to adapt their business models and content strategies to remain competitive in the digital age.

Country	% of Internet Users
North America	73.6%
Western Europe	56.1%
Asia Pacific	47.7%
Latin America	41.8%
Central and Eastern Europe	27.6%
Middle East and Africa	20.6%
World Wide	44.9%

Furthermore, OTT platforms have disrupted the traditional economics of the media industry, posing both opportunities and challenges for content creators and distributors. On one hand, OTT platforms offer new revenue streams and monetization opportunities for content creators through subscription-based models, advertising, and licensing deals. On the other hand, the proliferation of OTT platforms has led to the fragmentation of audiences and increased competition for viewership, making it challenging for content creators to stand out amidst the crowded digital marketplace. In addition to transforming the entertainment industry, OTT

platforms have also had a profound impact on the way news and information are consumed and disseminated. With the rise of digital news outlets and streaming services, consumers have access to a diverse array of sources and perspectives, enabling them to customise their news consumption experience based on their interests and preferences. However, the proliferation of unverified information and misleading information on digital platforms has also raised concerns about the authenticity and credibility of online news sources, highlighting the necessity for literacy of media and responsible journalism in the digital age.

Review of Literature

Significant changes in information systems through the digitisation of media have led to changes in social perceptions and behaviours. This analysis delves deeply into the interrelationship of gender issues with digitisation, with a focus on the representation of women and gender minorities in new media and over-the-top (OTT) platforms. Drawing insights from a selection of key books, journals and reports, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at play in the digital media landscape.

"Gender & Digital Security: Results from a Scoping Study" by Maya Ganesh (2020), Ganesh critically examines the gendered dimensions of digital media, highlighting the importance of inclusive and feminist approaches to technology design and content creation. She argues for the need to address structural inequalities in digital spaces and amplify marginalised voices to create a more equitable media ecosystem.

"Big Digital Humanities: Imagining a meeting place for the humanities and the digital" by Patrik Svensson (2016), this interdisciplinary volume explores the intersections of gender, technology, and culture in the digital age, featuring contributions from scholars across various fields. The book delves into issues such as online harassment, gender representation in gaming, and the politics of digital activism, offering nuanced insights into the complexities of gender dynamics in digital spaces.

"Women and Media: A Critical Introduction" by Carolyn M. Byerly and Karen Ross (2006), provides a comprehensive overview of women's representation and participation in media industries, examining the impact of digitalization on gender equality and diversity. They analyse the ways in which women are portrayed in traditional and digital media, the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, and the challenges faced by female content creators and journalists.

"Gendered Media: Women, Men, and Identity Politics" by Karen Ross (2010), explores how gender identities are constructed and negotiated through media representations, with a focus on the digital mediation of gendered experiences. She discusses the role of social media platforms, online communities, and digital storytelling in shaping gender norms, stereotypes, and expectations in contemporary society.

"Who Makes the News?" by the Global Media Monitoring Project (2020), This report provides a comprehensive analysis of gender representation in news media worldwide, highlighting persistent gender biases and stereotypes in news coverage. It examines the underrepresentation of women as news sources, experts, and decision-makers, as well as the marginalisation of gender minorities in media discourse.

Developments in Information and Communication Technology

Developments in information and communication technology (ICT) have revolutionised the landscape of gender discourse by providing innovative platforms for marginalised voices, fostering global dialogue, and challenging entrenched stereotypes. Social media platforms, like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, have arisen as influential catalysts for social change, enabling individuals to share their experiences of gender-based discrimination, harassment, and violence on a global scale. Hashtags like #MeToo and #TimesUp have galvanised movements for gender equality, empowering survivors to speak out and mobilise collective action against systemic injustices (Dasgupta, 2020). These digital spaces have democratised the narrative surrounding gender issues, amplifying the voices of those traditionally marginalised by mainstream media. Moreover, online communities and forums have become vital hubs for engaging in discussions, seeking support, and sharing resources on gender-related topics. Platforms like Reddit, Tumblr, and Medium host diverse forums and blogs dedicated to feminist discourse, gender studies, and activism. These digital communities provide a safe and inclusive space for individuals to explore intersectional perspectives on gender, acknowledging the complex interplay of factors such as race, class, and sexuality in shaping lived experiences (Nakamura, 2018). By facilitating dialogue and solidarity among diverse groups, online platforms contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gender issues and promote collective advocacy for social change.

Advancements in digital storytelling and multimedia technologies have further enriched the presentation of new perspectives on gender issues, allowing individuals to creatively express their lived experiences and challenge prevailing stereotypes. Projects like "Everyday Sexism" and "Humans of New York" leverage photography, video, and narrative storytelling to humanise the experiences of women and gender minorities. Through personal stories and visual imagery, these digital platforms provide a poignant depiction of the everyday struggles and triumphs faced by individuals navigating gendered spaces (Gray et al., 2017). By offering alternative narratives that defy conventional norms and expectations, digital storytelling fosters empathy, understanding, and solidarity among diverse audiences.

Furthermore, the democratisation of knowledge through open-access publishing has facilitated greater access to scholarly research on gender issues, making academic knowledge more accessible and inclusive. Open-access journals, such as *Gender & Society* and *Feminist Media Studies*, publish interdisciplinary research that examines various dimensions of gender inequality, representation, and empowerment. By disseminating critical perspectives on gender-related topics, open-access publishing platforms contribute to broader public discourse and inform policy debates on issues ranging from reproductive rights to media representation (Bayne & Ross, 2019). Through collaborative efforts between researchers, activists, and policymakers, open-access publishing promotes evidence-based advocacy and advances the agenda for gender justice and equality.

Over-the-top (OTT) platforms have emerged as influential mediums in challenging gender stereotypes by providing avenues for diverse and inclusive content creation. Leveraging advancements in digitalization, these platforms have revolutionised the media landscape, enabling creators to present authentic and nuanced stories that reflect the complexity of gender identities and experiences. Unlike traditional media outlets, OTT platforms offer greater flexibility and creative freedom to content creators, by allowing them to explore themes and narratives that challenge traditional gender norms. This departure from conventional storytelling has paved the way for more inclusive representations of gender,

empowering marginalised voices and fostering greater diversity in media content (Roy, 2019).

Digitalization has facilitated direct engagement between OTT platforms and their audiences, leading to a more personalised and responsive viewing experience. By harnessing user data and algorithms, OTT platforms can tailor content recommendations to individual preferences, thereby promoting greater diversity and inclusivity in media consumption habits. Through interactive features and feedback mechanisms, viewers can also actively participate in shaping the content landscape, providing valuable insights and perspectives that inform the creation of more inclusive narratives. This collaborative approach to content creation not only strengthens audience engagement but also ensures that diverse voices are heard and represented in the digital media space (myfrenzi, 2023).

OTT platforms have capitalised on digitalization to expand their global reach and impact, transcending geographical and linguistic barriers to foster cross-cultural dialogue on gender issues. With the proliferation of high-speed internet and mobile devices, viewers from diverse backgrounds can access content that challenges traditional gender norms and promotes social change. Initiatives such as Amazon Prime Video's "All Voices Film Festival" exemplify the platform's commitment to empowering underrepresented voices, including women, LGBTQ+, and minority creators, by providing resources and distribution opportunities. This global outreach not only amplifies diverse perspectives on gender equality but also fosters solidarity and collaboration among activists and content creators worldwide (Ghosh, 2023).

Case Studies

Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms have emerged as pivotal players in challenging gender stereotypes through a diverse range of content offerings. One notable case study is the *Indian web series "Made in Heaven,"* available on *Amazon Prime Video*. Made by Zoya Akhtar and Reema Kagti, this series follows the journey of two wedding planners in Delhi as they navigate the intricacies of love, marriage, and societal expectations. "Made in Heaven" confronts gender-related issues such as arranged marriages, patriarchal traditions, and societal pressures faced by women. By portraying its female characters as multifaceted individuals with agency and ambition, the series challenges traditional gender roles and contributes to a more inclusive representation of gender in Indian media (Ghosh, 2020).

India's "Delhi Crime" (Netflix)

"Delhi Crime" is an Indian web series on Netflix, which is based on the 2012 Delhi Nirbhaya gang rape case. The series, which showcases the investigation led by the Delhi Police, illustrates how OTT platforms have given creators a new level of creative freedom. Unlike traditional TV networks or censorship boards, platforms like Netflix allow for the exploration of sensitive and complex subjects. This freedom enabled "Delhi Crime" to provide a nuanced and realistic portrayal of the incident and its aftermath. Moreover, the global reach of Netflix brought international attention to issues of gender-based violence in India, highlighting the plight of the victim and societal attitudes towards gender violence. The series also portrays a strong female protagonist, DCP Vartika Chaturvedi, emphasising women's leadership roles in a male-dominated field and challenging traditional gender stereotypes.

America's "The Handmaid's Tale" (Hulu)

"The Handmaid's Tale," based on Margaret Atwood's novel, depicts a dystopian future where women are subjugated in a theocratic society. Hulu's platform provided the show with the opportunity to stay true to the novel's dark and intense themes, which might have been diluted on conventional networks. The long-form storytelling format enabled by OTT platforms allowed for an in-depth exploration of characters and themes over multiple seasons. The series critically examines the erosion of women's rights and bodily autonomy in a patriarchal society, portraying a chilling vision of what happens when women's freedoms are stripped away. Additionally, it highlights themes of resistance and empowerment, focusing on the fight for freedom and justice. This series underscores the significant impact OTT platforms can have in bringing bold and thought-provoking content to a broader audience.

Korea's "Sky Castle" (JTBC, Netflix)

"Sky Castle" is a South Korean drama series that initially aired on JTBC and is available on Netflix. The show explores the lives of wealthy families and the intense pressures of academic success. The presence of Netflix as a global platform allowed "Sky Castle" to gain international recognition, contributing to the rising global popularity of Korean dramas. This extended reach meant that the series could engage audiences who might not typically watch Korean television. "Sky Castle" delves into the sacrifices women make for their children's success and the societal expectations placed upon them. It also addresses the gender dynamics in education, examining the different pressures and expectations placed on male and female students within a highly competitive academic environment.

Brazilian Context: "Coisa Mais Linda" (Most Beautiful Thing) (Netflix)

In Brazil, "Coisa Mais Linda" (Most Beautiful Thing), available on Netflix, addresses gender issues within the historical context of the late 1950s and early 1960s. The series follows the lives of four women who navigate personal and professional challenges in a male-dominated society. It explores themes of female empowerment, friendship, and the struggle for independence and equality. The historical setting allows the series to highlight the progress and setbacks in the fight for gender equality. By focusing on the experiences of women from different backgrounds, "Coisa Mais Linda" provides a multifaceted perspective on gender issues in Brazil. The global platform of Netflix has enabled this story to reach a wide audience, sparking conversations about gender roles, feminism, and social change. The series sheds light on the resilience and solidarity among women, emphasizing their roles as trailblazers in a patriarchal society. This narrative not only resonates with Brazilian audiences but also offers universal themes of empowerment and resistance that inspire viewers worldwide.

Nigerian Context: "King of Boys" (Netflix)

"King of Boys," a Nigerian film available on Netflix, showcases how OTT platforms can address gender issues within the context of power dynamics and societal expectations. The film centers around Eniola Salami, a powerful businesswoman and political figure who navigates the treacherous world of Nigerian politics. Her character challenges the traditional roles assigned to women in Nigerian society, portraying a woman who wields significant power and influence. The success of "King of Boys" on Netflix has highlighted the potential of African cinema to reach a global audience and address important social issues. The film's

portrayal of a strong female protagonist who defies societal norms has resonated with viewers both in Nigeria and internationally, promoting discussions regarding gender equality and empowerment of women. Eniola's journey through the labyrinth of power, corruption, and personal ambition exemplifies the complexities faced by women in leadership, inspiring debates on gender roles within political and business arenas across different cultures.

Japanese Context: "Followers" (Netflix)

In Japan, the series "Followers," available on Netflix, addresses contemporary gender issues within the context of social media and digital culture. The show follows the lives of women navigating the pressures and opportunities of modern Tokyo, highlighting the impact of social media on their personal and professional lives. "Followers" explores themes of identity, self-expression, and the challenges faced by women in a rapidly changing society. The global reach of Netflix has allowed "Followers" to bring Japanese perspectives on gender issues to a wide audience. The series provides a nuanced portrayal of the complexities of modern womanhood in Japan, addressing issues such as career ambitions, relationships, and societal expectations. By presenting these stories on a global platform, "Followers" contributes to a broader understanding of gender dynamics in contemporary Japan. The show's exploration of the interplay between traditional gender roles and modern aspirations offers a reflective look at the evolving status of women in Japanese society, resonating with global audiences facing similar cultural shifts.

Swedish Context: "Quicksand" (Netflix)

In Sweden, "Quicksand," available on Netflix, delves into gender issues within the context of a gripping courtroom drama. The series, based on the best-selling novel, follows Maja Norberg, a teenager accused of involvement in a school shooting. As the story unfolds, it addresses themes of victimhood, power, and societal expectations of young women. "Quicksand" challenges stereotypes about femininity and criminality, providing a platform for discussing the pressures faced by young women in modern society. The series' international distribution through Netflix has brought Swedish perspectives on gender and justice to a global audience. "Quicksand" highlights the complexities of navigating gender norms while facing extreme societal scrutiny, offering a critical look at how gender influences perceptions of guilt and innocence. By engaging with these themes, the series fosters a global dialogue about the intersection of gender, justice, and media representation.

Australian Context: "Stateless" (Netflix)

Australia's "Stateless," available on Netflix, tackles gender issues within the context of immigration and human rights. The series, inspired by true events, follows four strangers whose lives intersect in an immigration detention centre. Among these characters is Sofie Werner, a woman escaping a traumatic cult experience, highlighting the vulnerabilities and resilience of women in extreme circumstances. The global platform of Netflix has enabled "Stateless" to reach an international audience, drawing attention to the gender-specific challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers. The series underscores the intersectionality of gender, trauma, and displacement, prompting viewers to consider the unique struggles of women in such situations. By providing a nuanced portrayal of these issues, "Stateless" contributes to a broader understanding of gender dynamics within global migration contexts and encourages empathy and action on behalf of vulnerable populations.

Turkish Context: "Ethos" (Bir Başkadır) (Netflix)

In Turkey, "Ethos" (Bir Başkadır), available on Netflix, addresses gender issues through the lens of diverse cultural and social backgrounds. The series follows Meryem, a part-time cleaner from a conservative background, as she navigates the complexities of modern Istanbul. "Ethos" explores themes of identity, class, and gender, highlighting the diverse experiences of women in Turkey. The global reach of Netflix has allowed "Ethos" to bring Turkish perspectives on gender issues to a wide audience. The series provides a nuanced portrayal of the intersection between traditional values and contemporary life, offering insight into the challenges faced by women in a rapidly changing society. By presenting these stories on a global platform, "Ethos" fosters a deeper understanding of gender dynamics in Turkey and encourages cross-cultural dialogue about women's roles and rights.

Conclusion

The global reach of OTT platforms has facilitated the cross-cultural exchange of ideas and perspectives on gender issues. By breaking down geographical barriers, these platforms allow diverse voices and stories to be heard, fostering a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics. For instance, the Indian series "Delhi Crime" challenges traditional gender roles, while Brazil's "Coisa Mais Linda" highlights the historical struggles for gender equality. Nigeria's "King of Boys" presents a powerful woman defying societal norms, and Japan's "Followers" explores modern gender dynamics influenced by digital culture.

Furthermore, Swedish series like "Quicksand" offers critical perspectives on gender and justice, while Australia's "Stateless" sheds light on the gender-specific challenges of immigration. Turkey's "Ethos" provides a window into the intersection of traditional and contemporary gender roles. These narratives, made accessible through global OTT platforms, foster a richer and more diverse dialogue on gender issues.

Distribution, creation and consumption of content have been transformed in the digital age, with OTT platforms leading the charge. OTT platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime Video, and others have not only democratized access to content but also revolutionized how stories are told, particularly those concerning gender issues. The confluence of digitalization and new media has provided creators with unprecedented freedom, enabling them to explore complex and often controversial themes without the constraints traditionally imposed by broadcast networks and censorship boards. This democratisation is crucial for gender issues, as it ensures that stories of women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other marginalised groups are represented authentically and accurately. For example, the Indian series "Made in Heaven" on Amazon Prime Video addresses themes such as LGBTQ+ rights, female autonomy, and societal norms within the context of Indian weddings, contributing to the global discourse on these issues.

Moreover, digital platforms facilitate interactive and participatory engagement. Viewers can share their thoughts and discussions on social media, creating a dynamic and interactive dialogue around the content they consume. This interaction not only extends the life of the content but also deepens its impact by fostering a community of engaged viewers who discuss and advocate for gender equality.

The success of these case studies underscores the transformative potential of OTT platforms in reshaping cultural narratives and promoting social change. By prioritising diverse representation and amplifying underrepresented voices, OTT platforms have become instrumental in challenging gender stereotypes and fostering greater inclusivity in media content. Moving forward, continued efforts to promote diversity and representation on digital platforms will be essential in advancing gender equality and creating a more inclusive media landscape.

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