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Representation Of Minority Communities In Ott Platforms

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Abstract

A dynamic and diverse representation of minority communities on OTT platforms has been presented through various ideologies. Over-the-top video streaming platforms have created new avenues for producing televisual content for mass audiences with less censorship and fewer restrictions. This opens a door of opportunity for understanding the impact of visual communication through new media. OTT platforms, being subscription-driven and global, offer more freedom than traditional media, allowing diverse storytelling, niche narratives, and uncensored cultural expression. This has opened space for minority voices, but challenges remain. Minority protagonists are leading web series and movies. Intersectional identities like LGBTQ+ Muslims, Dalit women, and Indigenous queer characters are starting to get screen time. To understand the representation of minority communities on OTT platforms, the researcher applied Representation Theory (Stuart Hall) and Intersectionality (Kimberlé Crenshaw). Representation Theory shows how minorities are socially constructed in media. Postcolonial Theory highlights the Western or upper-caste gaze in narrative control. Intersectionality (Kimberlé Crenshaw) helps analyze how race, caste, gender, and sexuality intersect in on-screen identities. Web series, movies, scenes, and dialogues help in understanding the representation of minority communities and the thinking of content providers on OTT platforms. The qualitative method was also applied to gather in-depth information from content providers. Using a structural film-theoretic approach, the paper specifically attempts to explore the degree to which representation is applied in the portrayal of minorities in selected web series.

Keywords: #OTTplatform #MinorityCommunities #Stereotyping #NewMedia #Entertainment

Introduction

A small group of people within a larger population who have a different religion, language, or other characteristic is called a minority community. They often experience disadvantage or discrimination within society. In many contexts, the term is used to describe groups that are smaller in number than the majority population. A country like India has a rich culture where many religious, ethnic, and linguistic communities exist, and among them, representing minorities is very critical. However, media channels such as television, cinema, print, and digital media often represent them and can influence public thoughts and attitudes towards them. There are many types of minority communities on the basis of religion (e.g., Muslims, Christians, Sikhs), ethnicity (e.g., Dalits, tribal populations), and language (e.g., speakers of

regional languages). They face stereotypes, prejudices, underrepresentation, and misrepresentation in the media. They have struggled to achieve accurate and fair representation in the media landscape. The dynamics of minority representation are critical in Indian mass media. The purpose of this research paper is to understand how the representation of minority communities affects societal views and inclusion. OTT platforms are increasingly showcasing diverse narratives, including those of minority communities, but challenges remain in ensuring accurate and nuanced representation. While some platforms have broadened representation, stereotypes and biases can still be present. Media representations of minorities are always changing with the context and storyline, but some stereotypical presentations still exist. Clark (1969) suggested that the media presentation of minorities goes through four stages. The first stage is 'non-recognition', in which minorities are almost invisible. The second stage is 'ridicule'; in this stage, media platforms present minorities in derogatory, stereotypical images, such as silly, evil, stupid, or lazy. The primary intent of these representations is to increase the self-esteem of the dominant group. When the minority group protests, the content provider moves to the third stage, which is 'regulation'. In this stage, these groups are presented in socially acceptable roles, such as police officers, teachers, or soldiers. The fourth stage is 'respect', when the group is presented in both positive and negative roles, and their depictions are the same as those of dominant groups. In short, content providers in television represent minority groups in a stereotypical manner and are always dominated by the dominant group. A dynamic and diverse representation of minority communities on OTT platforms has been presented through various ideologies. Over-the-top video streaming platforms have created new avenues for producing televisual content for mass audiences with less censorship and fewer restrictions. This opens a door of opportunity for understanding the impact of visual communication through new media. OTT platforms, being subscription-driven and global, offer more freedom than traditional media, allowing diverse storytelling, niche narratives, and uncensored cultural expression. This has opened space for minority voices, but challenges remain. Minority protagonists are leading web series and movies. Intersectional identities like LGBTQ+ Muslims, Dalit women, and Indigenous queer characters are starting to get screen time. The rise of Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney+ Hotstar, Zee5, SonyLiv, and regional streaming services has transformed the global entertainment industry. Unlike traditional television or cinema, OTT platforms offer diverse narratives, regional stories, and global perspectives at the click of a button. One of the most important questions in this digital era, however, is: How are minority communities represented on these platforms? Representation in media is not only about visibility but also about voice, authenticity, and the power to shape perceptions.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the representation of minority communities on OTT platforms, the researcher applied Representation Theory (Stuart Hall) and Cultivation Theory (George Gerbner). Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model explains how audiences interpret media messages differently based on their contexts. In the context of media studies, Representation Theory explores how media texts depict reality, particularly concerning the portrayal of individuals, social groups, and events. It examines how media shape our perceptions and understanding of the world, our place within it, and how others are viewed. George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory proposes that prolonged exposure to television content shapes viewers' perceptions of social reality, leading them to see the world as depicted in media, particularly regarding violence and crime. Intersectionality (Kimberlé Crenshaw) describes how various social and political identities — such as race, gender, class, and sexuality — overlap and create unique and compounding forms of discrimination or oppression that are more complex than the sum of their individual

parts. Structuralist Film Theory is an approach that views film as a linguistic system, analyzing how recurring patterns, codes, and conventions — such as camera angles, lighting, and narrative structure — create meaning for an audience. It focuses on identifying underlying, recurring structures within a film and across multiple films to understand deeper cultural and social significance beyond the surface narrative. This theory emerged in the 1960s and 1970s and aims to provide a scientific way to decode films by breaking them into their structural components and examining their relationships.

Research Objectives

- To analyze the representation of marginalized communities (such as women, LGBTQ+, and rural populations) in selected web series on OTT platforms.
- To identify the narrative themes, character constructions, and storytelling techniques used to portray marginalized voices in OTT content.

Literature Review

Al-Nassiri (2021) researched the representation of Muslim women in the OTT industry and found that media can promote or distort viewpoints, values, and ideologies — particularly through stereotypical portrayals of minorities. According to Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model, social inequities strongly influence a person's decoding of messages, especially in terms of class status. The relatively disempowered tend to push back against the dominant meanings of texts controlled by those in power. Dyer (1984) first confirmed the importance of allowing people who have been marginalized in a given society to provide diverse and dynamic representations of themselves that do not rely on the social stereotypes propagated by the dominant society through television. Gray (2000) discusses the importance of having a multiplicity of Black characters — both good and bad — to achieve diversity in representation. 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 (Uniyal & Mirza, 2024). Traditionally, minority communities have often been marginalized or stereotyped in mainstream cinema and television. They were either invisible or portrayed through narrow, often problematic tropes. For instance, Muslims were frequently shown as extremists, LGBTQ+ characters as comic relief, and Dalits or tribal groups as backward and dependent. Women belonging to minority communities often faced double marginalization — based on both gender and community. OTT platforms promised a break from these stereotypes because of their digital-first, less-censored, and experimental nature. With increasing subscriber bases from different linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds, the demand for authentic and inclusive stories has grown.

METHODOLOGY

In terms of methodology, a structuralist film-theoretic approach has been used for this study. According to structuralism, a film consists of a set of patterns or structures, and the meaning of a film is derived from understanding these patterns and the relationships between them. Accordingly, a set of codes has been adopted to analyze role portrayals, and the purpose of the analysis is to classify the stance adopted towards the marginal community as positive, neutral, or negative. The codes adopted for analyzing the roles are based on the framework suggested by Banerjee and Kakade (2019, p. 36):

- Camera Composition (lighting, camera angle)
- Facial Expression and Body Language
- Dressing Sense/Attire

- Language
- Profession
- Perceived Message

DATA INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS

Category	Paatal Lok (Amazon Prime)	Delhi Crime (Netflix)	Made in Heaven (Amazon Prime)	Four More Shots Please! (Amazon Prime)
Camera Composition	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative
Background Music	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral
Facial Expression and Body Language	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative
Dressing Sense/Attire	Negative	Negative	Positive	Positive
Language	Negative	Negative	Negative	Negative
Profession	Negative	Negative	Neutral	Neutral
Perceived Message	Negative	Negative	Negative	Positive

Representation in OTT Series

In *Paatal Lok*, when we talk about the representation of regional, cultural, and minority women, the camera composition often uses a high-angle or eye-level shot, which represents a compressed character or someone being dominated. The background music is neutral. The facial expressions made by other characters toward minorities are generally negative. The upper caste characters never show positive expressions toward the lower caste. Dressing, language, and profession depend on caste in both series — *Delhi Crime* and *Paatal Lok*. Camera composition is also used negatively to portray women in *Delhi Crime*. In *Made in Heaven*, however, dressing and profession are shown positively, and the music remains neutral. But the language used toward the LGBTQ+ minority is often abusive, and people display negative expressions toward individuals belonging to this community. The storytelling and character representation give a fairly negative message about the LGBTQ+ minority. OTT platforms, not being subject to censorship issues, showcase characters more boldly across all series. Sex scenes and female characters are represented openly and are often oversexualized without limitation. The web series *Four More Shots Please!* features four female protagonists and uses abusive language, objectionable body language, and double-meaning camera compositions. However, character portrayal, profession, and background music remain largely neutral in this series.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Regional and Cultural Diversity

Shows like *Paatal Lok* (Amazon Prime) and *Delhi Crime* (Netflix) highlight caste and class dynamics in urban India. Through the characters, the directors represent these social realities. In *Paatal Lok*, Hathoda Tyagi is identified as a Dalit character. His violent persona emerges from systemic caste-based humiliation and oppression. His backstory shows how caste atrocities push individuals toward violence. Mary Lyngdoh faces racial discrimination in Delhi, highlighting how casteism overlaps with racism in urban India. Tope Singh, portrayed as a Dalit Sikh, endures social exclusion and caste slurs in Punjab, pointing to caste oppression within Sikh communities. Kabir, a Muslim character, suffers from Islamophobia and stereotyping, especially amid post-terrorism paranoia in India. Politicians, godmen, and media tycoons manipulate narratives for power. They live in comfort but fuel violence through systemic corruption. These people, known as the Elite Class, resemble the *Swarg Lok*. The middle class, represented by *Hathiram*, is like the *Dharti Lok*, constantly torn between survival, morality, and ambition. His struggles reflect the aspirations and frustrations of the lower-middle-class police force. Migrant workers, slum dwellers, Dalits, and Muslims are portrayed both as victims of systemic exploitation and as scapegoats for society's fears. They form the underclass in this series, symbolically represented as *Paatal Lok* — a space of suffering and social decay. The intersections of caste and class make their struggles even more complex. For example, being Dalit and poor or Muslim and working-class compounds marginalization. *Delhi Crime* (Netflix, especially Season 1) also portrays caste and class dynamics powerfully, even though its primary focus is the 2012 Delhi gang rape case. The Delhi Police is shown as hierarchically stratified: senior officers like DCP Vartika Chaturvedi (Shefali Shah) are well-educated, English-speaking, and upper-class, while lower-rank constables often come from rural or lower-caste backgrounds. This hierarchy translates into unequal treatment — constables are overworked and humiliated, while senior officers are cushioned by privilege. The perpetrators of the crime are depicted as rural migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, struggling at the margins of Delhi's urban economy. This reflects how poor migrants, often lower-caste, live in slums or unauthorized colonies, working insecure jobs as bus cleaners, drivers, or laborers. Their economic precarity contrasts with the relative affluence of the middle and upper classes.

LGBTQ+ Representation

Series like *Made in Heaven* (Amazon Prime) boldly explore same-sex relationships and challenge social taboos. The character Karan Mehra, one of the lead protagonists, is openly gay — something rarely depicted with honesty in mainstream Indian media. His journey portrays the struggles of LGBTQ+ individuals in India, from childhood trauma to adult relationships, reflecting both personal and societal challenges. The series does not stereotype his sexuality; instead, it presents him as a layered, ambitious, and vulnerable individual. His love life is treated with the same seriousness as heterosexual relationships in the show. The series directly addresses Section 377 (the colonial-era law criminalizing homosexuality, struck down in 2018). Karan's encounters with law enforcement and police harassment reflect the real struggles queer people faced before decriminalization. The show challenges the taboo of silence surrounding homosexuality in Indian families. For example, Karan's strained relationship with his conservative mother highlights generational conflict and the stigma attached to coming out. By placing Karan at the center of the narrative — instead of sidelining him — the show breaks the norm of invisibility often imposed on LGBTQ+ characters. *Four More Shots Please!* integrates LGBTQ+ characters into mainstream narratives rather than confining them to stereotypical roles. Umang, a bisexual fitness trainer from a conservative Punjabi family, has a story that goes beyond simply "coming out." It explores how her sexuality intersects with her career, friendships, and self-acceptance. Her relationship with Samara

Kapoor (played by Lisa Ray), a celebrity, highlights both the joy and challenges of queer love in India — including societal stigma, media scrutiny, and family pressures. Importantly, Umang is portrayed as strong, independent, and multidimensional — not a stereotype of queerness. By making her one of the core four leads, the series positions LGBTQ+ identity at the heart of its narrative, not on the margins. Samara, a glamorous Bollywood actress who falls in love with Umang, shows the tension between private desires and public image, especially as a queer woman in the patriarchal film industry. Her struggle to commit to Umang due to societal and career-related pressures reflects the real-life challenges many queer individuals face. Samara's story adds nuance — she is not shown as fearful or tragic, but as a complex individual navigating love, ambition, and identity. The show highlights family rejection, societal prejudice, and media stereotyping, but balances them with love, friendship, and resilience, painting a fuller picture of LGBTQ+ lives.

Here's your text with **grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure corrected** — the **content, meaning, and examples remain unchanged**. I've also improved consistency in capitalization (e.g., show titles) and readability while keeping your academic tone intact.

Women from Minority Communities

DCP Vartika Chaturvedi (*Delhi Crime*) and other characters are examples of how, while the series primarily focuses on class and caste dynamics, it also highlights the struggles of women from marginalized communities in urban India. The female victims and their families often come from minority or lower socio-economic backgrounds, shedding light on how gender-based violence disproportionately affects them.

In *Paatal Lok*, Mary Lyngdoh (Mairembam Ronaldo Singh's character's wife), as a woman from the Northeast, represents both gender and racial minority struggles. Her character faces everyday racism, discrimination, and alienation in Delhi, highlighting how women from such communities are doubly marginalized—by both gender and ethnicity.

The character Faiza Naqvi (Kalki Koechlin) in *Made in Heaven* (Amazon Prime Video), a Muslim woman, struggles with identity, social stigma, and independence. Her story represents how minority women often battle stereotypes and restrictions imposed by both society and their own communities.

In *Four More Shots Please!* (Amazon Prime Video), Umang, a bisexual woman from a conservative Sikh family in Ludhiana, represents both religious and sexual minority struggles. Her character challenges taboos around women's sexuality, same-sex love, and autonomy.

Conclusion

Many OTT shows include minority characters simply for diversity points, without providing depth or meaningful character arcs. Certain communities continue to be boxed into negative roles—for example, Muslims as terrorists or lower-caste characters as helpless victims. Platforms often prioritize content that appeals to larger audiences, sidelining niche or authentic minority stories. International OTT platforms may also promote globalized diversity agendas that sometimes overlook local nuances of caste, religion, and ethnicity.

The representation of minority communities in OTT media has significant social consequences. Positive and authentic portrayals can:

1. Foster empathy and inclusivity among viewers.
2. Challenge deep-rooted stereotypes and prejudices.

3. Empower marginalized communities by enabling them to see themselves in dignified roles.

On the other hand, negative or superficial portrayals reinforce prejudices and social hierarchies. To address this, OTT platforms should:

- Encourage minority creators, writers, and directors to tell their own stories.
- Adopt sensitivity readers and cultural consultants to avoid misrepresentation.
- Provide funding and visibility for regional, indie, and grassroots-level stories.
- Balance entertainment with social responsibility, acknowledging the role media plays in shaping collective consciousness.

OTT platforms have opened new doors for the representation of minority communities, offering fresh narratives that challenge traditional stereotypes. However, the journey remains incomplete. True inclusivity will be achieved only when minority communities are not just represented but are given the agency to narrate their own stories. In this way, OTT platforms can become powerful instruments of cultural democracy, where every voice—majority or minority—finds its rightful place on screen. Representation of minorities in OTT content is not just about entertainment. Authentic stories can break down misconceptions and stereotypes. By showcasing the lived experiences of marginalized communities, OTT narratives encourage audiences to empathize. When minority viewers see themselves represented in dignified and strong roles, it validates their identities and broadens understanding of diverse communities for audiences across India and the world.

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