

Digital Portrayal of Youth in Contemporary OTT Media**Dr. Kavita Verma****Mr. Devendra Singh****Abstract**

The Development of information and technology, The OTT platform Over-The-Top such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney +Hotstar has been transforming the media consumption patterns in the youth. This book chapter examines the representation of youth in OTT content that is focusing the themes of crime, violence, abusive language and sexual aggression. With fewer censorship constraints compare to traditional cinema, television and OTT platform often portray youth characters in narratives centered on rebellion, deviances, psychological conflict and moral ambiguity.

The chapter critically explores how such portrayals shape social perception of youth identity, behavior, and aspirations. While some content attempts to present realistic depictions of contemporary challenges—such as peer pressure, drug abuse, sexual exploitation, and digital culture—there is a growing concern that repeated exposure to explicit crime, violence, rape narratives, and abusive language may normalize aggression and desensitize viewers. The study also analyzes whether OTT storytelling reinforces stereotypes of youth as impulsive, hyper-sexualized, and prone to criminal tendencies, or whether it provides a nuanced understanding of their socio-economic and emotional struggles.

The findings contribute to ongoing debates about media regulation, content responsibility, and the need for balanced storytelling in contemporary digital entertainment spaces.

Keywords- Crimes, Violence, OTT, Aggression, Obscenity, Youth Representation, Digital Media, Vulgar Language, Moral Degradation, Media Influence, Content Regulation, Censorship, Cyber Culture, Popular Culture, Media Ethics,

Introduction

Indian television has travelled a long journey from a single state-controlled screen to today's borderless digital universe. Khalid, M. Z., & Ahmed, A. (2014) Mentioned in their study that in its early years of the TV, Hum Log, Buniyaad, and Ramayan reflected social values, national identity, and moral discipline, creating a shared cultural experience for Indian families. The 1990s liberalization introduced private channels and urban narratives, while

shows like Tara and Hasratein began questioning traditional norms.

The 2000s marked the rise of melodramatic family sagas such as *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, which dominated prime time, alongside reality shows like *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, bringing glamour and mass participation. Gradually, youth-centric programmes like *Dill Mill Gayye* reflected changing lifestyles and aspirations.

With the arrival of OTT platforms, storytelling shifted sharply. Web series such as *Sacred Games* and *Mirzapur* replaced family-centric morality with bold narratives of crime, power, and rebellion. Unlike earlier television, these platforms operate with limited censorship, allowing the frequent use of vulgar language, graphic violence, and morally ambiguous characters. As a result, youth representation has moved from disciplined ambition to aggressive individualism and sensationalized rebellion.

Tiwari, S., & Rai, S. K. (2021) mentioned that OTT (Over-the-Top) platforms refer to digital services that deliver video, audio, and interactive content directly to users through the internet, without the involvement of traditional cable or satellite television networks. These platforms enable viewers to access movies, web series, documentaries, television programmes, music, and gaming content anytime and anywhere. With the widespread availability of smartphones, tablets, laptops, and smart televisions, OTT services have become an integral part of contemporary media consumption.

Unlike conventional broadcasting systems, OTT platforms provide on-demand access, allowing users to choose what, when, and how they wish to watch. This shift has transformed audiences from passive viewers into active content selectors. Platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Jio+ Hotstar, and ZEE5 have played a significant role in popularizing this digital viewing culture in India.

A key feature of OTT platforms is the use of artificial intelligence and data analytics to personalize user experiences. These systems analyse viewers' watching patterns, preferences, and search history to recommend relevant content. As a result, users are continuously exposed to material that aligns with their interests, which enhances engagement and increases viewing time. While such personalization improves convenience, it also raises concerns regarding content dependency, algorithmic influence, and limited exposure to diverse perspectives.

Access to OTT services is available through both websites and mobile applications. To use these platforms, individuals simply need to download the relevant application on their smartphone, tablet, laptop, or smart television and complete a basic registration or subscription process. Many platforms offer flexible subscription models, including monthly,

yearly, and ad-supported plans, making digital entertainment accessible to a wide range of audiences.

1.1.Types of OTT Platforms

According to the Wahab, A., Waheeduddi, et al., (2024) OTT services can be broadly classified into different categories based on the nature of content they provide:

1. Video Streaming Platforms

Video streaming platforms focus on providing films, web series, documentaries, and television shows. These services have become the primary source of entertainment for many users, especially among youth. Popular platforms in India include Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Jio+ Hotstar, and ZEE5. Through original productions and regional content, these platforms cater to diverse linguistic, cultural, and social preferences.

2. Audio and Music Streaming Platforms

Audio and music streaming platforms offer access to songs, podcasts, audiobooks, and radio programmes. Well-known services in India include JioSaavn, Gaana, Apple Music, Spotify, and YouTube Music. These platforms allow users to create personalized playlists and discover new artists, thereby shaping contemporary listening habits.

3. Live TV Streaming Platforms

Live TV streaming platforms provide real-time access to television channels, news broadcasts, sports events, and entertainment programmes. Services such as JioTV, SonyLIV, and Airtel Xstream enable viewers to watch live content without relying on traditional cable connections. These platforms combine the advantages of conventional television with the flexibility of digital access.

4. Gaming OTT Platforms

Gaming OTT platforms provide access to cloud-based and mobile games as part of digital subscription services. Examples include Amazon Prime Gaming and Netflix Games. These services integrate gaming with entertainment subscriptions, reflecting the growing convergence of media and interactive technologies.

1. Changing Portrayal of Youth in From Contemporary to Digital Narratives-

Parmar, K., & Pandit, M. (2021) examined that the rapid growth of OTT platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and Jio + Hotstar has significantly reshaped the representation of youth in contemporary media. Unlike traditional cinema and television, these platforms operate with relatively flexible content regulations, allowing the portrayal of intense themes

such as crime, violence, abusive language, and rape. Youth characters are often depicted as rebellious, emotionally conflicted, hyper-independent, or entangled in criminal and morally ambiguous situations. While some narratives aim to realistically portray the socio-economic pressures, identity struggles, peer influence, and digital anxieties faced by young people, repeated exposure to explicit violence and aggressive behavior may contribute to normalization and desensitization among viewers. Such portrayals can shape public perception by reinforcing stereotypes of youth as impulsive, deviant, or overly sexualized, potentially overshadowing their creativity, resilience, and social engagement. This chapter critically examines how OTT storytelling constructs youth identity in the digital era and evaluates its psychological, cultural, and social implications. By analyzing themes of crime, violence, abusive language, and sexual aggression, the study explores the broader impact of digital entertainment on audience perception and youth self-image, contributing to ongoing debates about media responsibility and ethical content creation.

2.1. Youth in Contemporary Media –

Contemporary Media narratives increasingly portray youth as aspirational, ambitious, and goal-oriented individuals striving for personal and professional success. Young characters are often depicted pursuing higher education, competitive careers, entrepreneurship, creative professions, or social recognition. These representations reflect the changing socio-economic environment, where success is closely linked to mobility, innovation, and self-reliance. In contrast, several mainstream television serials such as *Afsar Bitiya*, *Sadda Haq: My Life My Choice*, and *Reporters* have portrayed youth aspirations with a stronger focus on education, career development, and family responsibilities. These programmes highlight the struggles of young protagonists who strive to achieve professional success while simultaneously supporting their families and navigating social constraints. By emphasizing perseverance, moral values, and emotional resilience, such serials present youth as hardworking and goal-oriented individuals. Unlike many OTT narratives that prioritize sensationalism, these television shows promote narratives of self-improvement, sacrifice, and social mobility, thereby offering more balanced and socially constructive representations of young people's ambitions and life challenges. Conventional television serials such as *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, *Anupamaa*, and *Taarak Mehta Ka Ooltah Chashmah* continue to follow largely repetitive formats and traditional value systems. These programmes emphasize family-centric narratives, moral instruction, and conventional social roles. As a result, mainstream television has shown limited evolution in addressing the changing aspirations, identities, and lived

realities of contemporary Indian youth.

Such portrayals highlight the determination, resilience, and adaptability of young people in navigating academic pressures, career uncertainties, and societal expectations. At the same time, they also reveal the emotional and psychological challenges associated with high aspirations, including stress, anxiety, fear of failure, and identity conflicts.

2.2. Portrayal of the Youth in OTT platform:

In contemporary OTT narratives, several popular web series such as *Mirzapur*, *Sacred Games*, *Paatal Lok*, and *Asur* have significantly contributed to the construction of a particular image of youth characterized by violence, aggression, and criminal tendencies. In these series, young protagonists and supporting characters are frequently portrayed as participants in illegal networks, gang rivalries, political conspiracies, and underground economies. Their journeys are often shaped by experiences of poverty, social marginalization, family dysfunction, and lack of institutional support, which gradually push them towards crime and moral compromise.

These narratives commonly associate success, recognition, and social mobility with the use of force, manipulation, and unlawful means. Violence is repeatedly presented as a legitimate strategy for survival and dominance, while aggressive behaviour is portrayed as a sign of strength and masculinity. As a result, youth characters are often shown engaging in acts of revenge, intimidation, drug trafficking, contract killings, and organized crime, thereby reinforcing the idea that criminality is an inevitable response to social hardship.

While such representations may aim to reflect the harsh realities of certain socio-economic contexts, their persistent emphasis on brutality and lawlessness risks promoting a distorted understanding of youth identity. The complexity of young people's lives is frequently reduced to narratives of anger, rebellion, and deviance, leaving little space for positive attributes such as empathy, creativity, social responsibility, and ethical decision-making. Moreover, the glamorization of criminal lifestyles through stylized visuals, dramatic storytelling, and charismatic anti-heroes may further intensify their appeal among impressionable audiences.

From a psychological perspective, continuous exposure to such content may contribute to desensitization towards violence and normalize aggressive behaviour as an acceptable mode of conflict resolution. It may also influence young viewers' attitudes towards authority, social norms, and moral boundaries. Culturally, these portrayals risk reinforcing stereotypes that associate youth with danger, instability, and moral decline, thereby shaping negative public

perceptions.

Within the broader framework of media studies, this pattern raises important concerns regarding social responsibility and ethical content creation. OTT platforms, while benefiting from creative freedom, also carry the responsibility of presenting balanced and nuanced representations of youth. A more inclusive approach that highlights resilience, constructive struggle, and social engagement alongside conflict and adversity is essential for fostering healthier perceptions of young people in the digital era.

2.3. Gender Representation and Sexuality in OTT Content: Scholarly Perspectives and Media Narratives:

A survey report by Bhardawaj A , et al,. (2017) mentioned that OTT platforms have emerged as powerful spaces for negotiating gender representation and sexuality, offering greater creative freedom and narrative flexibility than traditional media. Popular web series such as *Made in Heaven*, *Sex Education*, *Four More Shots Please!*, and *Romil and Jugal* have been widely discussed in academic studies and media reviews for their bold engagement with issues of gender, relationships, and sexual identity. Existing research suggests that these series reflect a shift from conservative television narratives to more open, experimental, and socially reflective storytelling, enabling discussions on women's empowerment, masculinity, and LGBTQ+ visibility. Young women in these narratives are often portrayed as independent, career-oriented, and emotionally expressive, challenging patriarchal norms and traditional expectations; however, scholars like Kumar M & Bhatnagar P. (2019) also note that empowerment frequently coexists with subtle forms of objectification and sexualization driven by commercial interests. Similarly, representations of masculinity in OTT content oscillate between emotional vulnerability and the reinforcement of toxic stereotypes that associate manhood with dominance, aggression, and control, thereby shaping young viewers' perceptions of gender roles and relationships. One of the most significant contributions of OTT platforms has been the increased visibility of LGBTQ+ youth, with series such as *Made in Heaven*, *Romil and Jugal*, and *Sex Education* presenting narratives of self-discovery, acceptance, and social struggle that promote empathy and inclusivity, although some studies caution against occasional stereotyping and limited character depth. Furthermore, digital storytelling on OTT platforms has played a crucial role in breaking long-standing social taboos related to sexuality, consent, menstruation, sexual health, infidelity, and non-normative relationships, encouraging public dialogue and critical reflection, particularly among young audiences. At the same time, researchers warn that the explicit and stylized nature of such content may contribute to hypersexualization and the commercialization of

intimacy. Overall, existing literature emphasizes that OTT representations of gender and sexuality significantly influence youth identity formation, self-image, and relationship expectations. While these platforms have expanded opportunities for inclusive and progressive storytelling, they also carry the responsibility of ensuring balanced, ethical, and socially sensitive portrayals that promote respect, equality, and psychological well-being in the digital era.

2.4. Language, Slang and Popular Culture

OTT platforms have increasingly contributed to the negative transformation of language, slang, and popular culture among youth by promoting excessive informality, aggression, and superficial digital symbolism through popular series such as *Mirzapur*, *Sacred Games*, *Kota Factory*, and *The Family Man*. These programmes frequently rely on hybrid language, particularly Hinglish mixed with regional slang and abusive expressions, which normalizes crude, disrespectful, and aggressive communication styles. Nanda, B., et al., (2024) mentioned that such language is often justified in the name of realism, its repeated use may influence young viewers to adopt insensitive and inappropriate modes of speech in everyday interactions, thereby weakening linguistic discipline and cultural refinement. Moreover, the widespread circulation of dialogues and scenes from these series in the form of memes, short videos, and viral content has encouraged the trivialization of serious social issues. Complex narratives are often reduced to humorous, sarcastic, or sensational fragments, promoting shallow engagement rather than critical reflection. This meme-driven culture reinforces impulsive humour, mockery, and glorification of violence, further shaping a casual attitude towards crime, abuse, and moral transgression. In addition, OTT platforms increasingly imitate social media aesthetics by emphasizing stylized visuals, glamorous lifestyles, and influencer-like personas, which promote unrealistic standards of success, popularity, and self-presentation. Youth characters are frequently shown seeking validation through digital visibility, material display, and social approval, reinforcing the idea that personal worth is measured by online recognition. Such representations may contribute to anxiety, comparison, low self-esteem, and excessive dependence on virtual identities among young audiences. Overall, existing studies suggest that the growing dominance of Hinglish slang, meme culture, and social media-influenced aesthetics on OTT platforms is contributing to linguistic degradation, superficial cultural engagement, and performative social behaviour. While these trends enhance entertainment value and market appeal, they also risk encouraging cultural homogenization, emotional detachment, and distorted value systems. From a critical

perspective, the unchecked promotion of such digital language and symbolism raises serious concerns about their long-term impact on youth communication, cultural sensitivity, and psychological well-being in the contemporary media environment.

Freedom of expression vs. moral policing:

OTT platforms allow creators greater liberty to explore controversial themes related to politics, religion, sexuality, crime, and social inequality. As a result, several popular web series have emerged that challenge traditional norms and dominant ideologies. For instance, *Sacred Games* and *Mirzapur* were widely appreciated for their realistic portrayal of crime and power politics, but also criticized for excessive violence, abusive language, and explicit content. Similarly, *Tandav* faced strong public backlash and legal complaints for allegedly hurting religious sentiments, while *Leila* was accused of promoting politically sensitive narratives.

These controversies reflect the growing tension between creative autonomy and social control. Supporters of artistic freedom argue that such series encourage critical thinking and reflect social realities, while critics claim that they promote obscenity, cultural disrespect, and moral decline, especially among youth. In many cases, protests, court cases, and demands for bans have been raised by political, religious, and cultural groups, leading to pressure on creators and platforms to modify or withdraw content. This phenomenon indicates the rise of moral policing, where certain sections of society attempt to regulate media content based on personal or ideological values.

At the same time, the lack of a strong and consistent regulatory framework for OTT platforms has further complicated this issue. While self-regulatory codes and government advisories exist, their implementation remains uneven. Excessive censorship may restrict meaningful storytelling and suppress dissenting voices, whereas complete freedom without accountability may encourage vulgarity, misinformation, and negative stereotypes. Therefore, the ongoing conflict between freedom of expression and moral policing highlights the need for a balanced regulatory approach that protects creative rights while ensuring ethical responsibility. Such a framework is essential to promote socially sensitive, culturally respectful, and intellectually engaging digital content in the contemporary media environment.

Conclusion:

The rapid growth of OTT platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Jio+ Hotstar, and ZEE5 has significantly transformed media consumption in India by providing audiences with

easy access to personalized and on-demand content. While these platforms have expanded creative opportunities and diversified storytelling, they have also raised serious concerns regarding the increasing portrayal of youth in negative, violent, and morally ambiguous roles. This study highlights that many OTT narratives frequently depict young characters as aggressive, criminal, and emotionally unstable, often associating success with power, domination, and unlawful behaviour. Such representations risk normalizing violence and deviant conduct, thereby shaping distorted perceptions of youth identity among viewers. The widespread use of abusive language, excessive slang, and vulgar expressions in popular web series has contributed to the growing acceptance of crude and disrespectful communication among young audiences. The circulation of such content through memes and social media further reinforces these negative linguistic patterns.

These trends have intensified debates related to censorship, regulation, and ethical responsibility in the digital media environment. The tension between freedom of expression and moral accountability remains central, especially in a culturally sensitive society like India. The absence of strict regulatory frameworks has allowed the unchecked spread of explicit and sensational content, raising concerns among parents, educators, and policymakers. Although government guidelines and self-regulatory models have been introduced, their effective implementation remains limited.

While OTT platforms have revolutionized entertainment and storytelling, their increasing emphasis on violence, vulgar language, and negative youth portrayals demands greater regulatory oversight and ethical awareness. A balanced approach that respects creative freedom while promoting socially responsible content is essential to protect young audiences and ensure that digital media contributes positively to moral values, cultural sensitivity, and healthy social development.

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