



Role of the Media in an Unequal World: LGBTQ Gender Identity and Portrayal

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Abstract: The LGBTQ community has for long been stigmatised in various countries of the world, including India. While the community found acceptance in ancient times, the present society has been less inclusive. The far-reaching influence of the traditional and new media can be utilised to spread awareness about the issues of the minority LGBTQ community. Various efforts such as online campaigns, support groups, cinematic productions as well as coverage of offline initiatives by the media have helped raised awareness in recent times. This paper explores the trends related to gender portrayal of the LGBTQ community in the media and the role of the media in gender identity formation and acceptance.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term LGBTQ refers to Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning individuals that form intimate partnerships with members of the same sex and/or the opposite sex. While ancient Indian literature indicates social support for homosexuality and acceptance of the third gender, the modern society has not been as accepting. Individuals from the community are often stigmatised and denied basic human rights.

A study by Badgett (2014) revealed that 41 percent of Indians would not want a homosexual neighbour, and 64 percent believe that homosexuality is never justified. Dutta (2012) notes that the elite section of the community is treated differently and are better accepted than the lower section of the same that are often criticised for certain assertive and flamboyant gestures.

Various legal and administrative efforts have been made in the past few decades to benefit the community. In 2009, the Delhi High Court decriminalised private sexual activity between adults of the same sex. Further, the government's Unique Identification Initiative which provides identity numbers to Indian residents now also includes transgenders. This is positive recognition for the minority community. Recently, landmark developments such as a transgender woman becoming the mayor of Raigarh, Chhattisgarh in 2015 and the Supreme court legalising homosexual activity in 2018 have received widespread attention by the national and international media.



Presently, the traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, television, radio, cinema as well as new media that includes mobiles, websites, social media and all internet enabled exchange are being used by activists from within and outside the community for building awareness and empowerment.

Gender identity and LGBTQ

The concept of gender identity is itself very ambiguous. While sex is assigned at birth and is associated with biological attributes, gender is associated with how individuals are socialised in accordance with socially constructed roles and behaviours. One's gender identity determines self-perception as well as how one interacts with individuals within and outside one's social group.

There are various external factors that help frame self-perception as well as gender identity, including that for LGBTQ individuals. One of these is exposure to media content that depicts specific attributes and behaviours of individuals belonging to the LGBTQ community. Bond (2020) explains that the media acts as a powerful agent of socialisation for individuals. It helps them learn about their sexuality, identity, coping strategies and helps them develop a feeling of belongingness to the community. Over the past few decades, the number of individuals consuming media, especially social media, has grown massively. This has led to consumption of more media content, including that related to the LGBTQ community as well as the rise in the use of participatory and social media to form relationships with other individuals from similar backgrounds. Individuals are also increasingly sharing messages received via print and video advertisements, television, cinema and online marketing with their peers.

A study by Fox and Ralston (2016) explains that during the formative stages of their identity, social media proves to be an effective platform for learning about LGBTQ issues by providing information, role models and also a means for interaction within the community. Social media enables learning experiences due to factors such as visibility, association, persistence, anonymity and interactivity. Cerni and Talmud (2015) explain that online forums help individuals express themselves and this helps prevent mental health issues. Further, role models in the media serve as a source of inspiration. People such as Keshav Suri executive director of The LaLiT chain of luxury hotels, Prince Manavendra Singh Gohil, author Vikram Seth are vocal about LGBTQ rights.

Media content is often a reflection of cultural values and aspirations. As such, this content is known to help individuals develop self-perception and more specifically a positive perception (Hammack, 2015 and Ochman, 1996). For example, in a study on lesbian film viewers, it was found that subjects preferred female actors that were rumoured to be gay. In fact, people of all genders are influenced by culturally accepted definitions of beauty, femininity and masculinity that are projected by the media (Mayo Jr., 2017).

Digital spaces such as Facebook are considered safe spaces for individuals from the community to explore issues of sexuality and gender (Lucero, 2017). Lucero's study describes participants' accessibility to social media, frequency of activity within Facebook, use of social



media as a connection and exploration strategy, levels of commitment to social media and perceptions of comfort online as important factors that help in constructing identities in digital spaces. Another study by Bryson (2004) focussed on LGBTQ women and how they preferred to express themselves freely in the digital spaces rather than the offline environment where cultural boundaries can be restrictive. Bhatia (2016) also found that members of the LGBTQ community in India use new media to develop self-identification in the virtual world. Members often translate their online activist efforts to offline practices related to community mobilisation for collective action.

The experience on digital spaces can also have some limitations such as living in a bubble. Cavalcante (2018) explains that social media platforms such as Tumblr generate *queer utopia*, a space that helps to elevate queer potential but on the other hand it also produces *queer vortexuality*, an experience almost like being sucked into an online black hole with severe restrictions.

Media portrayal of LGBTQ

As mentioned previously, individuals form self-perception and learn about expected behaviours from depictions in media content. While things were different a few decades ago, cinematic productions today are projecting a modern outlook that is more inclusive.

Earlier, LGBTQ individuals were often portrayed as side-kicks to the main characters in movies across continents. These characters were often comedians in the plot or were shown to be bullied and harassed. Padva (2008) explains that this culture of bullying individuals of the community could be witnessed across cinema, television, journals, web sites, fiction, children's books, comics, music, advertising, and pornography. A study on Canadian newspapers and popular magazines and one news website concluded that older LGBTQ individuals were largely invisible and often depicted as victims of discrimination as survivors and activists. They were also often shown as role models that displayed resilience and created a path for the younger generation (McInroy and Craig, 2015). Homosexual or transgendered characters have also often been portrayed as negative. The popular character of *Maharani* in the movie *Sadak* and the role of actor Ashutosh Rana in *Sangharsh* are noteworthy.

Certain Indian media projects such as the 1996 film *Fire* that depicted a homosexual relationship between two women had led to a controversy where the depiction was deemed to be against Indian culture. Similarly, Marathi playwright Vijay Tendulkar equitably depicted women in gay relationships in his play *Mitrachi Gostha*. He later wrote the screenplay for the movie *Umbartha* which showed the sensitive portrayal of a homosexual relationship. It is also noteworthy that while gay men may be finding a minimal level of acceptance in society, gay women and transgenders have still not been able to achieve that. A Malayalam movie *Randu Penkuttikal* shows how a young girl is prevented from becoming a lesbian. However, some independent productions that include web series are increasingly depicting inclusive content (Christian 2012, 2014). Recent Indian web series and movies such as *Made in Heaven*, *Memories in March*, *Aligarh*, *Margarita with a Straw*, *Shubh Mangal Savdhan* have contributed to mainstreaming of LGBTQ characters and issues.



The media and LGBTQ activism

Over the years there have been several efforts using various media platforms to raise awareness and provide support to the community. LGBTQ individuals have on various platforms raised their voice against the violation of their basic human rights, such as the right to live without fear of harassment, the right to choose a partner and the right to have a family. India's first gay magazine Bombay Dost was launched in 1990. Further, The Humsafar Trust was set up by the Editors of the magazine and works with the government to provide healthcare and support services to the LGBTQ community. The media has for long been covering the LGBTQ movement which includes pride walks and other community mobilisation initiatives by both government and non-government organisations such as peer counselling, workshops etc. Large scale events such as Chennai Queer LitFest, 2018, Hyderabad Drag Con 2019 and pride walks in various cities have been covered by the media. These efforts aim to bring the issue of LGBTQ rights within the purview of the traditional definition of gender equality.

Several social media platforms have been working for empowerment and awareness. Gay Bombay, Good as You and Orinam are among many social organisations and support groups that are using social media to promote LGBTQ rights. Exploration of the role of digital technologies has shown that these technologies help in building solidarity within the community apart from increasing civil and political participation and access to justice (Ng, 2017).

Social media platforms have been known to empower minorities. A study in China where collective expression is limited by the State, concluded that these platforms have helped the LGBTQ individuals and activists share relevant information and increase public visibility. Individuals have been known to sue the administration, working within the legal framework to fight for equal rights. In one such incident, the government was sued for publishing homophobic content (Yang, 2018). In fact, some have advocated the inclusion of LGBT literature in school stating that it would help students understand and accept their sexuality while the non-LGBTQ individuals would be able to better understand issues related to the community (Oltmann, 2015).

Bringing the community to the mainstream requires intense effort. The programming on US network Logo TV owned by ViacomCBS Domestic Media Networks and launched in 2005 originally targeted LGBT audiences before moving on to general cultural and lifestyle subjects (Carney, 2012). The 'Bold Is Beautiful' campaign by the ecommerce platform Myntra.com that touched upon the subject of homosexuality apart from other sub themes was a step towards projecting the brand as inclusive. The campaign found favour with the media. Zomato also ran a campaign that said 'Love is love'. Further, a survey that aimed to understand audience perception towards the campaign and concluded that open addressal of such issues would help empower the LGBTQ community and also help change narrow mindsets of the audiences (Chauhan and Shukla, 2016)

The Indian media has shown some varied opinions on LGBTQ issues. While watchdog organisations have portrayed a tendency to censor objectionable content, alternative methods such as digital remix and satire are also employed by media activists to transform what might



seem to be offensive to the LGBTQ audiences (Penney, 2015). Certain sections of the modern Indian media have not been so accepting of LGBTQ content. Lokmat Amravati, a Marathi daily, conducted a sting operation to expose people practicing homosexuality in 2013. It published a news article whose headline translated to ‘Amravati becoming a national den for homosexual activity’ attributing homosexuality to western influences. Similar efforts were made in some cities by the media to ‘expose’ homosexual activities. To add to this, mainstream media is often used to exploit queer gender identities for economic gains such as increasing television ratings and advertising revenue (Kerrigan, 2020). There are many journalists that are sensitive and sympathetic to the cause of LGBTQ empowerment. However, they may not be effectively sensitised to the diversity within the community and the issues faced by the sub-groups and the community as a whole. Former journalist Sharif Rangnekar explains that the media is influenced by the higher castes and hence the LGBTQ community may not find enough representation (Media totally neglected..., 2021).

In 2004, the media covered the twin murders of two gay men in Delhi. The coverage led to debates and discussions about discrimination and hate crimes in the country in certain sections of the media as well as on social media platforms. On the other hand, another section excessively sensationalised the ‘gay culture’ angle reinforcing stereotypes and negative attitudes towards the community.

2. DISCUSSION

LGBTQ issues and content in the media help develop gender identity, self-perception and also contribute to social acceptance. One can gauge social perception of the community by measuring reactions of the audiences towards LGBTQ related content in the media. Reactions are often based on a number of factors including sexual orientation and gender identity. Gillig (2016) explains that viewers often get emotionally involved with the storyline and characters and identify more with content related to their social group.

The media can help gauge majority sentiments towards the community and also help to influence it. A Twitter study in Indonesia revealed that most users were neutral about the anti-LGBT campaign in the country. (Fitri et al., 2019). Another study on Twitter deliberations on the Indian Supreme Court’s decision to decriminalise homosexuality found that users that supported the decision were tweeting about issues such as quality, justice, human rights of the community while those not in favour were posting about the threat the Indian culture (Khatua et al., 2019). Positive association has also been found between the extent of LGBTQ content consumption on digital media with actual social contact (both offline and online) with members of the community (Lissitsa and Kushnirovich, 2020).

The present society is slowly evolving towards becoming a more inclusive set up. Mainstreaming of LGBTQ related content is reflective of what audiences are willing to digest, but there still is a long way to go. The issue of gender identity and self-perception cannot be limited to conversations and interactions within the LGBTQ community but needs to find voice among the larger purview of the social set up. Both traditional and new media are required to assume a greater role in modern times to sensitize people towards major issues that affect the



community as well as focus on sub-sects within the community that have either been ignored due to ignorance or by intention. There is a greater need to sensitise journalists and content creators towards the LGBTQ community. These opinion leaders can then further the cause.

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