Role of Electronic Word of Mouth in Creating Gendered-Moral Discourse: Analysis of three Urdu-Hindi Women-Centric Web Series

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ABSTRACT

The study focused on the opinions of online reviewers' vis-à-vis content of three controversial urdu-hindi women-centric web series to understand the role of electronic word of mouth in creating a gendered-moral discourse. The three web series selected for the study were Churails, Bombay Begums, and Four More Shots Please. A total of 175 reviews on the selected web series available on Internet Movie Database (IMDb) and YouTube were analyzed. The study found that, in addition to establishing incorrect standards for women empowerment, the reviewers severely reprimanded the filmmakers for their pseudo-feminist and radical perspective on feminism, which celebrated immoral actions in the name of women empowerment. The critics objected to the web series being a feminist agenda against men by pointing out the two extreme portrayals of men and women battling sexism in their own extreme ways, which the reviewers deemed incorrect. The false representation of the setting, the makers' disregard for people's sensibilities and boundaries, and contentious features in the characters' lifestyles were also condemned. The study concludes that content creators need to keep the religious and cultural sensitivities of their broader audience in mind when designing content so that the message can be communicated in an effective and unblemished way.

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1. Introduction

Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms are increasingly dominating the media and entertainment industry due to their convenience, cost-effectiveness, personalization and lack of regulation, that eventually works in the favor of content creators as well as consumers (Gianchandani, Shah, & Sharma, 2020). The production, distribution, and consumption of web series and movies through OTT platforms is being considered a feasible alternative, and in the view of some scholars, a replacement of television and cinema (Gianchandani et al., 2020; Kumar & Mohapatra, 2020). Scholars have focused on the popularity of web series such as *Sacred Games* and *Mirzapur* to understand this shift which are considered as pioneers in terms of production of local content by local producers and growth of OTT platforms in India (Honmode, 2019; Khanna & Malviya, 2020). Factors such as flashbacks technique as a narrative style, commentaries on religion, politics, violence, and prostitution, storyline, production, and casting were found to be the major reasons for the success of these series (Honmode, 2019; Khanna & Malviya, 2020).

Kumar and Mohapatra (2020) argue that OTT platforms are preferred over traditional mediums of entertainment as the content produced in mainstream media is formula based in case of movies and melodramatic in case of television shows, which is why the marketers, content creators, and young consumers prefer OTT platforms, which is new, relatable, and close to reality (Srivastava, 2020; Sundaravel & Elangovan, 2020). Alternately, the OTT platforms have been criticized for their explicit content such as nudity, foul language, violence and crime, glorification

of drugs, tobacco smoking and alcohol, sexism and objectification of women, and lack of regulatory bodies to monitor the disseminated content (Prabhughate, Srinivasan, Ranga, Fritz, & Gafos, 2020; Suleman & Zehra, 2021). It can be argued here that the content displaying naturalization of sexism and objectification of women has long been disseminated through mainstream media and the audience today's acceptance of such content on OTT platforms is simply an extension of the foundations laid by mainstream media content.

Gender role stereotyping through categorization of female characters, perpetuation of sexist beliefs, objectification, and construction of ideal body image have remained dominant themes in Indian subcontinent visual media (Ahuja & Pundir, 2022; Inayat & Sadiq, 2020; Latif, Hassan, Majid, Tareen, & Tareen, 2020). The characterization of women in earlier mainstream films, which were mostly male-centric, was divided into three types; good women, objectified women and villainous women (Mukhopadhyay & Banerjee, 2021). Problematic behaviors by male protagonists in films such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge, Tere Naam, Darr, Wanted,* etc., including sexual offences as well as stalking against women, were romanticized and equated with love and can now also be seen in recent films like *Kabir Singh* which includes toxic masculinity and intimate partner violence as major themes in the movie (Ahuja & Pundir, 2022; Mukhopadhyay & Banerjee, 2021). Likewise, television shows such as *Naagin, Sasural Simar Ka, Saat Phere, Pinjara Khubsurati Ka,* etc. and songs like *Jalebi Bai, Munni Badnaam Hui, Sheela Ki Jawani, Coca Cola Tu, Tu Haan Kar Ya Na Kar Tu Hai Meri Kiran, Ek Garam Chai Ki Piyali Ho*, etc., objectify women, promote gender role stereotyping and display toxic masculinity. The representation of gender in OTT platforms is more nuanced, inclusive of serious issues, and shows a relatively new version of female characters (Ahuja & Pundir, 2022), for example, women were shown as independent and hardworking in web series and movies like *Aarya, The Family Man, Engineering Girls, Lust Stories, Pushpavalli, Aranyak, Four More Shots Please* and *Little Things*, etc.. The makers in OTT platforms are focusing on women's identity, breaking taboos, promoting individuality of female protagonists, avoiding gender stereotypes, and emphasizing empowerment and liberation of women (Martín-Párraga, 2020; Peter & Raj, 2021; Vaishnav, 2021).

Nevertheless, critics highlight that web series such as *Indian Matchmaking* and *Bombay Begums* reinforce the stereotypical images of women displayed in mainstream media and presents gender equality in opposition to the mainstream beliefs held in society, consequently, resulting in debates and conflicts as the audience starts equating gender equality to unacceptable behaviors (Martín-Párraga, 2020; Mukhopadhyay & Banerjee, 2021; Peter & Raj, 2021). This argument can explain why web series that presents women in opposition to stereotypical images and sexist beliefs ends up in controversies. These controversies often spread through electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which has been defined as the content created and disseminated by a consumer on digital mediums regarding their experience in consumption of product, service or a brand, which is directed towards other target consumers (Babić Rosario, De Valck, & Sotgiu, 2020). Anderson and Grether (2017) argue that movie reviews serve an intermediary role in production, distribution, and understanding of films and also influences public opinion about the films. Studies have also shown that the volume of reviews is directly proportional to sales of the films (Chen, Chen, Chao, & Wang, 2022).

McKenzie (2023) argues that online consumer reviews of films are now given more importance than reviews by professional film critics. These consumer reviews are being studied by different scholars from different perspectives such as sentiment analysis, volume and valence of reviews, helpfulness, and marketing, etc. to name a few. Previous studies have also shown that the film consumers give more importance to reviews by other consumers than the reviews by professional film critics, which ultimately have a positive or negative impact on revenues of films (Dastidar & Elliott, 2020). The women-centric web series disseminated through OTT platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Zee5, etc. have resulted in controversies over the content, resulting in public backlash, protests, legal notices, banning, and heavy fines. The ban culture in India and Pakistan keeps the makers involved in creative industries from experimenting and presenting diversity in their content as well as different social issues (Isani & Alavi, 2020; Visvanathan, 2015). Societal norms in India and Pakistan result in an increase in backlash and criticism faced by the makers of women-centric web series. Due to limited understanding of these concerns and exaggeration of these concerns through eWOM, moral panics are created, which result in unnecessary ban or restrictions on content creators. A lot of these opinions exaggerate

the negative aspects, which are limited to the small number of controversial elements such as foul language, nudity, etc. and overlook the positive aspects such as an alternate representation of gender and society in the content.

Keeping in view the above debate, the current study focused on the opinions of online reviewers' vis-à-vis content of controversial urdu-hindi women-centric web series to understand the role of eWOM in creating a gendered-moral discourse. The study will contribute to the existing literature in OTT platforms, eWOM and representation of gender and will help in understanding feedback of viewers on women-centric web series along with their moral concerns, which can be beneficial for content creators, viewers, and policy makers.

2.   Methods
For the present study, three controversial women-centric web series were selected after a detailed search through Google focusing on online news articles, blogs, and forums. These three web series were *Bombay Begums* (2021), Churails *(2020)*, and *Four more shots please* (2021). Out of these three web series, *Churails* received a legal notice from Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) in Pakistan and *Bombay Begum* received a notice from National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR). *Four more shorts please*, though did not receive any legal notice, but was severely criticized for portraying pseudo-feminism, drugs, and alcohol (Tiwari, Kansara, & Bahadur, 2020). The reviews on the selected web series available on Internet Movie Database (IMDb) and YouTube were analyzed. The number of IMDb reviews analyzed for *Bombay Begums* and *Four More Shots Please* were 50 each and for *Churails,* 30 reviews were analyzed. From YouTube, 15 reviews for each web series were analyzed. The study followed a qualitative inductive design to look for patterns and themes in the collected reviews. The review videos were transcribed and open-coding (line by line) was done, followed by axial coding and consequently, themes were identified in the data.

3.   Findings
3.1.   Setting erroneous standards of empowerment
A common and dominant pattern found in the analysis of reviews was the way empowered women protagonists were represented, that set erroneous standards of empowerment for women. The reviews identified difficulties with the character traits, choices and actions, lifestyle, camaraderie among characters, as well as their challenges and remedies. Reviewers mostly highlighted the dichotomy between appreciation for authentic and realistic representation of female protagonists and condemnation for inappropriate, not relatable, and distortion of female protagonists. Women were labeled as bossy, loud, immature, entitled professionals in *Four More Shots Please*, aggressive, violent, man-haters and against the legal system in *Churails*, and over-ambitious, selfish, unfaithful partners who make questionable decisions in *Bombay Begums*, all of which were discussed negatively by the majority of reviewers. The characterization criticism confirms the findings of Mukhopadhyay and Banerjee (2021) and Ahuja and Pundir (2022), since viewers in India and Pakistan have different views of ideal women in their thoughts, which do not fit the characterization of women in all three selected web series. Their lifestyle, conduct, and mindset were deemed problematic since the reviewers could not relate to their lifestyle and did not agree with the reason for their immoral behavior, choices, and actions. According to them, the female characters lacked moral and emotional intelligence, made questionable decisions, and engaged in unacceptable behavior that will have a negative impact on other young women watching these web series and viewing them as role models. They regarded them as hypocrites because they do the same things to men that they despise in other people. In their fight against patriarchy and all of their troubles, it appears like they are trying too hard to be progressive, and the makers are trying to tick off feminist check boxes without delving into the details, which ultimately does not create a true portrayal of an empowered woman.

3.2.   Having a pity party: Playing the Victim Card
Another major element that the reviewers condemned was the aggrieved, miserable, and weak ladies playing the victim card. The reviewers were upset by how the web series' so-called empowered women did not utilize their minds when making decisions and acting. Many reviewers raised concerns about how the oppression by men and circumstances excused their bad choices and judgments. The reviewers further added that portraying these women as indecisive, needing external validation, confused in relationships, struggling with problems they created on their own, and then feeling miserable about these problems were all attempts to glorify unacceptable behaviors and romanticize mental illnesses like depression and anxiety among the young

generation, which would eventually make them weak rather than give them strength to fight their problems. This objection by reviewers contradicts the findings of Kanwar and Singh (2021), Qureshi (2021), and Kurian (2021) as the women in these web series cannot be considered victims or weak.

3.3.   Supporting the wrong priorities
Reviewers voiced numerous reservations about the representation of women's priorities in their personal and professional lives in all three selected web series. They elaborated that these women are unconcerned about domestic household obligations and are driven by professional success, which many researchers believe is not a desirable quality in women, as reported by Abbas (2018), Inayat and Sadiq (2020), Kurian (2021), Mukhopadhyay and Banerjee (2021), Ahuja and Pundir (2022). Additionally, the reviewers found it disrespectful for women who managed to maintain a successful work-life and work-family balance while still achieving success in their relevant careers with dignity. Reviewers used examples from the web series to back up their claims, such as a single mother, who was a successful lawyer, who did not spend much time with her daughter or was concerned about her upbringing, leaving her daughter to a caretaker while juggling work and hanging out with friends and multiple partners. Another frequently mentioned example was of married women in *Bombay Begums* who had turbulent personal life despite having strong professional career. Some reviewers were also disappointed with Pooja Bhatt's character in the web series, playing the role of a successful CEO, because the reason for her success was sexual compromises, which, as the reviewers pointed out, gives the impression that women cannot have successful careers without such compromises. While discussing sexual compromises and professional success, another important case under this theme was the series *Churails*, where the controversy surrounding the series began over a viral clip in which a female character was narrating to another female character that she used illicit means to become financially secure.

3.4.   Pseudo-Feminism, phony problems and specious solutions
The majority of reviewers stated that all three web-series failed to empower women owing to the series' distortion of genders and society. They believed that the creators did not understand and were uninterested in exposing the true concerns of women as they disagreed with the challenges and solutions of the female protagonists shown in the series. Furthermore, they said that the creators were steering feminism in the wrong path by empowering women through immorality and other inappropriate tactics. Many reviewers complained that the filmmakers were trying too hard to look progressive. One reviewer objected over women not feeling remorse for going against legal system and justifying it by saying it does not matter if we break the law as the law itself is made by men. Another reviewer, while discussing the same theme stated *"The issues of women, problems in legal system of Pakistan cannot be resolved with violence against men; this series is neither aware, nor interested in those"*.

The reviewers reprimanded the creators for failing to depict actual and relevant female difficulties, as well as effective answers to the problems depicted in the chosen web series. They elaborated that the problems were usually non-existent problems generated by the protagonists themselves, and that they were also resolved quickly and easily. In addition to unrealistic and exaggerated concerns that appealed to only a specific segment of women in society, the remedies to these problems were deemed impractical, immature, and over the top. A considerable number of critics, for example, presented the example of a female character who was a victim of body shaming, who joined a semi-porn website, as a result of which she began feeling secure in her skin, which, according to the reviewers, was improper and should not be justified as done in the series. Other examples included criticism of *Churails'* use of extreme measures, such as violence against males, and married women cheating on their partners in the case of *Bombay Begums*.

3.5.   Female Camaraderie
Female Solidarity, which was more commonly regarded as strength in the case of *Churails* and *Bombay Begums*, was viewed as an issue by *Four More Shots Please* reviewers. The source of these issues was the female protagonists' over-reliance on their female friends, which lead to compromises in their identity. Furthermore, several female reviewers stated that female friends did not call out their friends when they were wrong and instead left things to their own discretion, which lead them doing things that were both wrong and bad for themselves. One critic, for example, described a female character stalking another female character, which is a legal

offense, and the female companion, who is a lawyer, does not advise her that it is improper. The reviewers also mentioned that just saying girl power and using buzz words does not solve problems of women. While the majority of reviewers criticized these female protagonists for being offensive and indecent, as well as stating that the women in their respective settings could not relate to the women in the selected web series, a minority of reviewers supported the representation of women in these web series. They saw them as real, relatable, and strong female figures whose experiences might serve as an inspiration for many women in India and Pakistan seeking good change.

3.6. Anti-state, religion, and cultural propaganda

The reviewers claimed that the creators were unconcerned about cultural and religious sensitivities of their settings, as well as the bounds of suitable and wrong behavior. They disagreed on the lifestyle and thinking set of female protagonists. The majority of reviewers objected to the female protagonists using vulgar language, drinking alcohol, smoking, or being in frequent relationships with men. In the case of *Four More Shots Please*, the choices of female protagonists such as casual sex, infidelity, drugs, etc. along with intimate scenes were criticized by the majority of reviewers; similarly, in the case of *Bombay Begums*, infidelity, extramarital affairs along with foul language, alcohol, smoking, women being involved with multiple partners, and the amount of intimate scenes were criticized by the majority of reviewers. One of the reviewers mentioned, *"Adding 5-10 adult scenes in every episode forcibly and showing provocative intimate scenes is equivalent to freedom for makers".* Aside from the aforementioned contentious elements, the creators of *Churails* were reprimanded for using the derogatory term *'Churails'* for Muslim Pakistani women and the female protagonists wearing 'burqa' while they were portrayed as problematic and engaging in immoral practices throughout the web series. Furthermore, the women standing up to men in their family and explicitly discussing things that were considered taboo in Pakistan, such as sex, adultery, and live-in relationships, as well as choices such as breaking the law, violence against men, and so on, were some issues raised by the reviewers that were contrary to the norms and traditions of a conservative society like Pakistan.

4. Conclusion

The study concludes that eWOM enhanced gendered-moral panics by instilling a general negative attitude toward the content of urdu-hindi women-centric web series. The majority of reviewers found all three selected web series to be highly unpleasant and urged that harsh actions be taken against the content to dissuade future content makers and users from making and watching such web series. First, the reviewers criticized the online series for portraying troubled women as ideals for women's emancipation. Their stories, difficulties, decisions, and actions regarding their lifestyle and how they dealt with their problems were heavily condemned since they were deemed to be contrary to the cultural and religious ideals of their particular settings. Second, in addition to establishing incorrect standards for women empowerment, the reviewers severely reprimanded the filmmakers for their pseudo-feminist and radical perspective on feminism, which celebrated immoral actions in the name of women empowerment. The critics objected to the web series being a feminist agenda against men by pointing out the two extreme portrayals of men and women battling sexism in their own extreme ways, which the reviewers deemed incorrect.

The false representation of the setting, the makers' disregard for people's sensibilities and boundaries, and contentious features in the characters' lifestyles were also condemned. They contended that the creators were not being realistic, nor were they concerned with the challenges of women and marginalized communities, but rather centered on an agenda to show an illicit lifestyle and target a community through this content, which would eventually lead to misconduct and a negative influence on the young generation. Despite the need for women-centric content in societies like India and Pakistan, where women face discrimination, violence and dehumanization (Ali & Tariq, 2022) without any hope for change, majority of people are not ready to accept the content on OTT platforms due to their cultural and religious beliefs but also due to the unfair and improper representation of such messages. The content creators, therefore, need to keep the religious and cultural sensitivities of their broader audience in mind when designing content so that the message can be communicated in an effective and unblemished way. It is necessary for both content makers and viewers to be critical of media depictions and to make way for women-centric material in the media and entertainment industries in order to improve women's standing in these societies.

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