

The Normalization of Unregulated Murky Content in Web Series and its impact on Societal Perceptions

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Abstract—The rise of digital streaming platforms in India has led to an increase in web series featuring murky and unregulated content, including morally ambiguous narratives, explicit themes, graphic violence, and depictions of unethical behavior. Unlike traditional Indian cinema and television, which are often subject to strict censorship and cultural sensitivities, web series operate with minimal regulatory oversight, allowing for the portrayal of themes that challenge deeply rooted Indian cultural norms. This study examines how the normalization of murky content in Indian web series influences societal perceptions, moral viewpoints, and cultural identity, despite the fact that such narratives often do not reflect real-life societal behavior.

While Indian society is largely governed by strong familial values, community-driven ethics, and cultural traditions, web series frequently depict casual crime, abusive language, extramarital affairs, substance abuse, and moral corruption as normalized aspects of daily life. This research explores whether such portrayals desensitize audiences, shift perceptions of morality, or create a distorted reflection of Indian society. Through content analysis of popular Indian web series, audience surveys, and expert opinions, the study investigates the gap between on-screen normalization and real-world societal behavior. Furthermore, it discusses the role of global influences, creative freedom, and the lack of content regulation in shaping India's evolving media landscape.

The findings aim to find whether the portrayal of murky themes in Indian web series is a true representation of societal change or an exaggerated dramatization detached from reality and the trying to normalize the murky content.

Index Terms—OTT, Web Series, Murky Content, Unregulated Content, Societal Perceptions

I. INTRODUCTION

The rise of OTT streaming platforms in India has significantly transformed the landscape of entertainment, offering a space where content

creators can explore themes unrestricted by traditional censorship. Unlike mainstream television and cinema, which are governed by regulatory bodies like the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) and Broadcasting Content Complaints Council (BCCC), over-the-top (OTT) platforms operate with minimal oversight. This has led to the growing normalization of murky content, characterized by morally ambiguous narratives, crime, infidelity, substance abuse, and explicit violence (Mukherjee, 2021). While such themes may serve as storytelling tools, their increasing prevalence raises concerns about how they shape societal perceptions, moral values, and cultural identity in India.

The Cultural Context and the Gap between Reel and Reality

Indian society has traditionally upheld strong family values, social ethics, and community-driven morality (Chopra S. , Indian Family Values vs. Changing Media Narratives: A Comparative Analysis, 2020). Themes such as casual crime, extramarital affairs, and unrestricted drug use—now commonly depicted in Indian web series—are often seen as deviations from cultural norms. While these portrayals might resonate with certain urban or globalized sections of society, they often do not reflect the majority's lived experiences. For instance, web series frequently depict extramarital affairs as common and accepted, surveys indicate that over 80% of Indian respondents still view infidelity as morally wrong and socially unacceptable.

The Role of OTT Platforms in Content Normalization Streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney+ Hotstar, and MX Player have played a crucial role in shaping modern narratives by introducing darker, more controversial themes. Shows such as Sacred Games (2018), Mirzapur (2018), Paatal Lok (2020), and Asur (2020) portray crime, corruption, and moral ambiguity as

normalized aspects of daily life (Rajadhyaksha A. , 2021). While some argue that these narratives offer a realistic depiction of socio-political issues, others claim they sensationalize murky themes for entertainment, making them appear more acceptable than they actually are in Indian society (Kumar R. , 2023).

Impact on Audience Perception

Repeated exposure to such themes may contribute to desensitization, leading audiences to view unethical behavior as commonplace (Gupta M. , 2020). According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), media plays a significant role in shaping human behavior, as individuals tend to imitate what they frequently observe. This raises concerns about how murky content in web series might influence young viewers, especially in a country where digital media consumption is rapidly increasing. A survey by (Banerjee & Sharma, 2021) revealed that nearly 65% of Indian youth aged 18–30 consume web series regularly, and many reported a shift in their perceptions of violence, corruption, and morality due to frequent exposure to such content.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The increasing popularity of digital streaming platforms in India has led to a shift in storytelling, allowing creators to explore themes that were traditionally censored in mainstream media. This shift has been met with both appreciation for creative freedom and concern over the normalization of murky content. Several studies have examined the role of media narratives in shaping public perception, the impact of unregulated content, and the cultural implications of digital entertainment in India. This literature review synthesizes existing research on these aspects, providing a foundation for understanding the societal effects of murky content in Indian web series.

Studies have shown that media plays a pivotal role in shaping social norms and influencing individual behavior (Bandura, 1977). Murky content, which includes moral ambiguity, lawlessness, and socially deviant behavior, is often presented as an acceptable or even aspirational way of life in Indian web series (Rajadhyaksha, 2021). For example, a study by (Mehta & Singh, 2022) analyzed *Mirzapur* and *Sacred Games* and found that protagonists involved

in criminal activities were often glorified, leading audiences to develop a neutral or positive perception of violence and corruption. Similarly, (Chopra, 2020) argues that extramarital affairs and substance abuse, themes prominently featured in *Four More Shots please* and *Made in Heaven*, are portrayed as normal lifestyle choices, despite their low acceptance in Indian society.

According to Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1976), prolonged exposure to specific media narratives can influence viewers' perceptions of reality. In the context of Indian web series, this theory suggests that constant exposure to murky themes may lead to desensitization, making audiences more accepting of behaviors that are generally considered unethical or taboo in Indian culture (Banerjee R. &, 2021). Research by (Gupta, 2020) found that 65% of Indian youth aged 18–30 who regularly consume web series reported a shift in their moral perspectives, with many acknowledging that such content influenced their views on violence, relationships, and authority. Another study by (Kumar, 2023) highlights how audience empathy for morally ambiguous characters (e.g., gangsters, corrupt politicians, or unfaithful spouses) may lead to a reduced sense of ethical clarity over time.

Despite the normalization of murky content in web series, several studies indicate a disconnect between on-screen narratives and actual Indian societal values (Chakraborty, 2022). Indian society is still largely conservative, with strong family structures and ethical frameworks guiding everyday life. A survey by Nielsen India (India, 2021) found that over 80% of Indian respondents disapproved of infidelity and excessive violence, yet these themes remain central to many web series. This raises questions about whether such content reflects an evolving India or merely caters to a niche, urban audience disconnected from traditional values (Sinha, 2021).

Summary and Research Gap

While existing literature provides valuable insights into the role of OTT platforms, the normalization of murky content, and its societal impact, there is limited research focusing specifically on the Indian cultural context. Most studies either analyze content trends or discuss media influence on a broader scale, but few explore the direct correlation between web series content and shifting societal perceptions in India. This study aims to fill this gap by combining

content analysis, audience perception surveys, and expert interviews to assess how web series shape ethical viewpoints and cultural values in India. Additionally, it will explore whether content regulation is necessary or if self-regulation by platforms is sufficient.

Research Scope and Objectives

This study seeks to explore the role of streaming platforms in content normalization. Study examines the gap between on-screen portrayals and real-life societal behavior in India. By analyzing popular Indian web series, audience perception, and cultural perspectives, the research will examine:

1. To analyze the portrayal of murky content in Indian web series
2. To examine audience perceptions towards web series content
3. To examine audience behavioral shifts due to exposure to murky content

Furthermore, this study will address the balance between creative freedom and cultural responsibility, questioning whether Indian web series are a reflection of evolving societal values or an overdramatized representation catering to digital audiences.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study will employ a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods to analyze the normalization of unregulated murky content in Indian web series and its impact on societal perceptions.

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods to explore the normalization of murky content in Indian web series and its impact on societal perceptions. The research follows an exploratory and analytical design, aiming to assess the portrayal of unregulated themes in web series, audience perceptions, and the broader psychological and cultural effects of such content.

Sampling Strategy -

To achieve this, the study will conduct content analysis of selected Indian web series, focusing on objectionable themes. Objectionable content refers to any material that violates applicable laws, regulations, or the rights of third parties. It includes content that is obscene, uses offensive language, is

sedition, objectionable, defamatory, threatening, incites racial hatred, blasphemous, misleading, or infringes upon any individual's intellectual property rights. (Lawinsider, 2018)

But mainly we have to examine the content on the following standards –

Sexual/Obscene Content – Scenes depicting sexual perversions or illustrating sexual or excretory organs or activities in an explicitly provocative manner.

Alcohol/Smoking Depictions – Scenes involving the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, or smoking, as well as drug addiction, or those that justify or glorify such substance use.

Profane Content – Includes "highly objectionable" language considered as public nuisance or abuse, along with double-meaning words that explicitly serve base instincts.

Criminal Themes - Pointless or avoidable scenes of violence, cruelty and horror, scenes of violence intended primarily to provide entertainment and scenes that may have the effect of desensitizing or dehumanizing people.

Miscellaneous Themes - Any content which depicts any kind of objectionable content other than all the above-mentioned points.

This will involve examining series like PaatalLok, The Family Man-2 to determine how frequently such themes appear and whether they are depicted as normalized aspects of life. A total of 18 episodes (12:44:11:07 hours) of both the web series have been included in the study. A code sheet of each episode has been prepared and its analysis has been done by dividing each scene shown in it into various parameters.

In addition to content analysis, the study will adopt a purposive sampling method will be used for audience surveys to ensure diversity in respondents. It will be conducted among 400 web series viewers of Madhya Pradesh aged 15-60. The survey will include Likert-scale questions and open-ended responses to measure audience perceptions regarding murky content, its realism or exaggeration, and whether it has influenced their views on crime, relationships, or ethics. The survey will also explore the potential desensitization effects of such exposure and whether age or cultural background plays a role in differing perceptions. Data analysis will involve thematic coding for content analysis, statistical analysis (using SPSS or Excel) for survey responses, and qualitative

coding and discourse analysis for interviews and FGDs.

Interpretation and Analysis -

To analyze the portrayal of murky content in Indian web series

Analysis has to be done on the basis of scene basis, consisting of a sequence of events and dialogue taking place in a specific location and time. We will analyze the above two web series on the basis of their script, visuals and dialogues and will also analytically study the objectionable content and language style used in these web series.

1. Different standards of objectionable content of PaatalLok (2020) web series have been included in the script and displayed. A total of 301 scenes have been depicted in 9 episodes of PaatalLok web series and its total duration is 06 hours 11 minutes 49 seconds and 18 frames (06:11:49:18). Each episode of the web series was given a title. A consolidated table of objectionable content and number of scene and frequency presented in web series is presented below (scenes related to Indian cultural values are not included in the presented table) –

Table 4.1 compiled code sheet of objectionable scenes shown in PaatalLok web series

PataalLok Web Series			
Standard	Total duration	Total Scene	Total Frequency
Sexual/Obscene Content	00:09:06:04	14	14
Profane Content	00:25:45:09	86	106
Crime Content	00:06:59:10	16	16
Drinking/Smoking Portrayal	00:24:56:00	31	32
Miscellaneous Content	00:01:52:14	5	5
Total	01:24:13:12	176	197

The web series PaatalLok contains 14 scenes related to sexual/obscene content, with a total duration of 00:09:06:04 and a frequency of 14. Profane content has the longest duration in the series, totaling 00:25:45:09, with 86 scenes and a frequency of 106. Crime-related content appears for 00:06:59:10, with 16 scenes depicting brutal crimes, and the frequency is also 16. Scenes portraying drinking and smoking occur 31 times, with a total duration of 00:24:56:00, and a frequency of 32. Additionally, other miscellaneous scenes have duration of 00:01:52:14,

with 5 scenes, and a total frequency of 5. So, the total duration of objectionable content in the “Pataal-Lok” series is 01:24:13:12 with the 176 scenes and frequency of 197 times.

2. Different standards of objectionable content of The Family Man-2 (2021) web series have been included in the script and displayed, a consolidated table of which is presented below (scenes related to Indian cultural values are not included in the presented table) –

Table 4.2 compiled code sheet of objectionable scenes shown in The Family Men-2 web series

The Family Man-2 Web Series			
Standard	Total duration	Total Scene	Total Frequency
Sexual/Obscene Content	00:02:49:08	6	6
Profane Content	00:09:38:11	31	41
Crime Content	00:21:18:03	14	14
Drinking/Smoking Portrayal	00:17:05:12	29	29
Miscellaneous Content	00:01:52:20	2	2
Total	00:59:45:14	89	99

The web series The Family Man 2 contains 6 scenes related to sexual/obscene content, with a total

duration of 00:02:49:08 and a frequency of 6. Profane content has the longest duration in the series,

amounting to 00:09:38:11, with 31 scenes and a frequency of 41. Crime-related content appears for 00:21:18:03, featuring 14 scenes of brutal crimes, with a frequency of 14. Depictions of drinking and smoking occur 29 times, with a total duration of 00:17:05:12, and a frequency of 29. Additionally, other miscellaneous scenes have duration of 00:01:52:20, with 2 scenes, and a total frequency of 2. Overall, the total duration of objectionable content in *The Family Man 2* is 00:59:45:14, spanning 89 scenes, with a total frequency of 99.

To examine audience perceptions and behavioral shifts due to exposure to murky content

This section of the study focuses on analyzing and interpreting audience responses in the context of OTT content as a modern medium of entertainment. The behavioral impact of web series content on viewers has been analyzed using descriptive analysis based on

overall percentage, mean, and standard deviation, as presented in Table and Graphics 4.3. For this study, a total of 18 questions (from 13 to 30) were included in the schedule, covering various effects of watching OTT video streaming platform and web series content.

Audience responses regarding OTT platforms and web series content have been analyzed based on frequency and percentage. In this section of the study, the analysis of audience responses to OTT platform and web series content has been conducted using statistical data and graphical representation. This study surveyed a total of 400 respondents, comprising 194 men (48.5%) and 204 women (51.5%). The demographic characteristics of the sample including age, gender, income levels, educational background, and marital status, are outlined.

S.No	Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
.	The content available in web series can be watched with the whole family.	17	47	84	182	70
	The content of the web series contains objectionable scenes and language	179	177	35	6	3
	There is a lot of objectionable content in web series	127	177	62	32	2
	Violent pornographic scenes are an essential part of the content of web content	53	137	100	92	18
	In web series, women are presented as objects	66	129	86	84	35
	Homosexuality is being normalized through web series	116	179	72	26	7
	Pre-marital, post-marital relationships, live-in relationships are being normalized in the web series content	139	189	44	21	7
	The web series theme is based on our changed attire (Western)	75	181	99	37	8
	After watching obscene or objectionable scenes in web series, a tendency to do such things awakens in the mind.	35	133	97	82	53
	After watching alcohol or smoking scenes in web series, the tendency to do such things awakens in your mind	28	132	66	87	87
	After watching violent scenes in web series, the tendency to do such things awakens in your mind	20	90	89	102	99
	Watching web series affects language style	96	190	64	34	16
	Watching web series content affects our eating	72	124	83	82	39

	behavior					
	If there is any interruption while watching a web series, it causes a feeling of anger or irritation in the mind	61	156	73	67	43
	Due to watching web series, some important scheduled work has been postponed	80	132	69	85	34
	One feels like watching a scene or episode of a web series again and again	112	137	72	47	32
	Web series content has influenced your views or any decision	47	129	91	88	45
	Have you ever been motivated (positively) by watching web series content?	116	186	57	29	12

This study aims to analyze the perceptions and behavioral influences of web series content based on survey data from a sample size of 400 respondents. The responses have been categorized into five levels: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree, with corresponding percentage values.

Only 16% (Strongly Agree + Agree) believe that web series content is suitable for family viewing, whereas a significant 63% (Disagree + Strongly Disagree) disagree, indicating that most respondents perceive web series as inappropriate for family settings. A large proportion of respondents, 89%, agree that web series contain objectionable scenes and language, with only 2% disagreeing. Similarly, 76% acknowledge the presence of general objectionable content in web series, supporting the notion that controversial material is prevalent. Regarding the depiction of women, 49% agree that women are presented as objects in web series, while 30% disagree, indicating a divided perception on gender portrayal.

The data suggests that web series are perceived as influencing societal norms, with 74% believing

To examine audience behavioral shifts due to exposure to murky content

	Changes seen in your behavior or lifestyle due to the exposure to murky content?	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	Lack of sleep	117	184	44	49	6
	Feeling Lonely	23	102	107	115	53
	Stay up late at night	139	206	42	9	4
	Decreased work capacity	57	189	70	63	21
	Stress in relationships	6	72	114	144	64
	Antisocial behavior	24	76	100	116	84
	Increased sexual behavior	28	164	74	66	68

homosexuality is being normalized and 82% agreeing that pre-marital, post-marital, and live-in relationships are being normalized. Additionally, 64% see Western attire influencing fashion trends in web series. Respondents were also asked about the potential influence of web series on their behavior, with 42% agreeing that obscene scenes impact the tendency to mimic such behavior, 40% believing alcohol and smoking depictions influence their actions, and 28% agreeing that violent scenes lead to aggression, while 50% disagree, indicating a split opinion on the link between media violence and real-life aggression.

Furthermore, 72% acknowledge that watching web series affects language style, while 49% believe their eating behavior is influenced by web series. Additionally, 54% report feeling irritation if their viewing is interrupted, 53% admit to postponing important work due to web series consumption, and 62% have a tendency to re-watch scenes repeatedly. Meanwhile, 44% feel web series have influenced their views or decisions, and 75% agree that they have been positively motivated by web series.

The survey also explored the lifestyle changes associated with binge-watching, with 75% experiencing lack of sleep, 37% reporting feeling lonely while 42% disagree, and 86% staying up late due to web series. Additionally, 61% feel their work capacity has decreased, 19% report stress in relationships while 52% disagree, 25% feel antisocial behavior has increased, and 48% acknowledge an increase in sexual behavior. The analysis reveals a widespread perception that web series contain objectionable material, influence social norms, and impact viewers' behavior, language, and lifestyle. The study highlights concern regarding binge-watching habits, sleep deprivation, and potential behavioral changes. However, a notable proportion of respondents also recognize the positive influence of web series, suggesting a complex and multifaceted impact of digital entertainment on society.

IV. CONCLUSION

The research findings indicate that web series have a significant impact on viewers' perceptions, behaviors, and lifestyles. A substantial portion of respondents believe that web series contain objectionable content, with concerns raised about the normalization of sensitive themes such as violence, substance use, and non-traditional relationships. While some respondents acknowledge the positive influence of web series, such as motivation and entertainment, others highlight adverse effects, including disrupted sleep patterns, reduced productivity, and increased antisocial behavior.

An in-depth content analysis of selected web series further supports these concerns. The web series *Paatal Lok* contains 176 scenes of objectionable content, appearing 197 times throughout the show, with a total duration of 01:24:13:12. Profane content dominates, lasting 00:25:45:09 across 86 scenes. Crime-related depictions are also notable, appearing for 00:06:59:10 in 16 scenes. Similarly, *The Family Man 2* features 89 scenes with objectionable content, occurring 99 times, with a total duration of 00:59:45:14. While profane content is significant at 00:09:38:11, crime-related scenes last 00:21:18:03, highlighting the prevalence of intense and mature themes in modern web series.

The findings aim to determine whether the portrayal of murky themes in Indian web series reflects a true

representation of societal change or an exaggerated dramatization detached from reality that seeks to normalize controversial content. The analysis reveals that while some web series claim to mirror society, their portrayal often leans toward dramatization, potentially shaping audience perceptions and behaviors. The study also examines audience attitudes towards web series content, showing a divided opinion on the normalization of themes such as crime, violence, and explicit content. Additionally, the research explores behavioral shifts in audiences due to exposure to murky content, highlighting its potential impact on daily life, social interactions, and personal choices.

The study underscores the need for media awareness and responsible viewing habits. Given the widespread consumption of digital content, media literacy and parental guidance are crucial in helping audiences discern and interpret the messages presented in web series. The findings suggest that while web series are a powerful medium for storytelling and cultural reflection, their potential impact on societal norms and individual behavior requires careful consideration. A balanced approach to content regulation and viewer discretion can help mitigate the negative effects while preserving the entertainment value of web series.

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