The Repercussions of Representation

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ABSTRACT

Representation in the media has, to a great degree, shaped people's views of communities they have not had personal interaction with. With growing awareness about the lives and rights of transgender individuals, a concern is raised about how they are showcased in media. This research study aims to evaluate the impact of depicting gender and related themes in media on the lives of urban transgender Indian youth belonging to the age group of 15 to 19 years old. This was accomplished through conducting focus group sessions to understand the participants' views furthermore thematic analysis was carried out to interpret and thematise the findings. The study illuminated feelings of alienation, from the rest of the community and from society as a whole. The participants showed signs of internalised transphobia that linked to the vision of them shown in the media. While moving forward, media seeking to represent the transgender, or any minority, community need to consider the impacts of their representation. In particular, having members from the community oversee their work and be involved in the production of the same would ensure authentic and relatable representation. This would create job opportunities for transgender individuals in the film industry, thereby increasing their livelihood and leading to betterment in the functioning of the industry. In addition, it would help secure the place of gender minorities in a society that currently either refuses to acknowledge their existence or has a warped perception of them.

Introduction

Transgender is an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression or behaviour does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth (American Psychological Association, 2021).

According to the 2011 Census, the population of people identifying as "other" under the gender section is 4,87,803. (Naik, n.d.) This number is, likely, an underrepresentation as many would hesitate to report their gender identity (Mandal, n.d.). Moreover, a range of gender identity and expression is not taken into account, thereby leading to more underreporting. Transgender individuals are thus, often rendered invisible, with a paucity of statistics regarding their homelessness, education and employment status, among others. Gender-disaggregated data does not reflect the reality of all gender minorities and cannot be used to make development decisions, especially for the inclusion of transgender and intersex persons, who are often misrepresented or absent in this data. (K., 2020)

This lack of understanding about the trans community of India is showcased when laws like The Transgender Persons (Protection Of Rights) Act, 2019 are passed without consulting a majority of the affected community. The rules were published in the middle of the lockdown with government-imposed restrictions on travel, thereby limiting access only to English reading transgender individuals with internet access.

Transgender activists have, since then, claimed that the Act removed many of the gains achieved in the NALSA vs Union of India (National Legal Services Authority) judgment in 2014. The NALSA judgment allowed self-identification of gender and further said that any insistence on SRS (sex reconstruction surgery) was immoral and illegal. However, the 2019 Act gives the district magistrate (DM) the power to recognise a person as trans and specifies that to identify as male or as female, one must supply proof of surgery to the magistrate.

It is clear that the status quo of deciding what is best for transgender people without involving them in the process is constantly reinforced (Pathak, 2019). A key aspect in maintaining this status quo is the perception of transgender and non-binary gender identities which is furthered through their **media representation**. Representation is how media texts deal with and present gender, age, ethnicity, national and regional identity, social issues and events to an audience. Media texts have the power to shape an audience's knowledge and understanding of these important topics. (*What is Representation? - GCSE Media Studies Revision*, n.d.)

Media plays an instrumental role in influencing how one sees themselves and how society perceives them. It influences one's relationship with one's gender, one's family and friends and reinforces one's place in society and community. Transgender individuals do not get to see themselves reflected in media, have characters to relate to, or the knowledge that they are not alone and society recognizes who they are (Banu et al., 2020).

The trans community in India has barely any representation in movies and media. When it is there, it misrepresents the people and further marginalises a marginalised community (Jobe, 2013). A majority population does not have proper information or awareness about the plight of the trans community in India.

Previous research has established cinema as a powerful medium to catalyse social change. The link between accurate representation and normalisation of queer identities in society has been shown. Projection of gender stereotypes in films forms society's perception of gender roles. The over-saturation of gender stereotypes in films results in the misrepresentation of gender roles which gets embedded in the human mind and is passed on from generation to generation as an acceptable view (Kaur, 2017)

Other research on the topic generally consists of content analysis. This is done by reviewing the effect lighting, dialogues, costumes, camera angles had on the perception of the character. The dramatic and jarring portrayal can be inferred as a way to make the audience abhor the character (Mushtaq & Ahmed, 2019).

An appalling lack of involvement of transgender individuals and their opinions characterises the discourse about their rights and representation. There is a dire need to involve transgender individuals in the discussion, whether that be in films or research.

This research hopes to address the gap in prior research through facilitating a discussion with transgender individuals.

Methodology

Research Aim

The research study aims to explore the lived experiences of gender nonbinary Indian youth through their perspectives of non-binary characters, gender portrayals, and related themes in Indian (Bollywood, Tollywood) movies. The objective of the study was to involve transgender and non-binary individuals in a conversation about their place in society. Through this study, a safe space was created to discuss how media representation had affected the trans community and how the same could be improved.

Research Design

The research design was quantitative, structured to incorporate in-depth, experience and opinion-based responses from participants hailing from a specific community.

Consent and Ethical Issues

All ethical considerations were followed for the current study. Informed consent was taken from the participants for data collection. A participation invitation letter was sent to each of them, informing them of what would be expected from the participants. Preluding the workshop, a one-on-one call was arranged with each of the participants to address any and all of their concerns regarding the research study and zoom session to assure them that their privacy and psychological safety were maintained.

Confidentiality and privacy of the respondents were maintained; no data would be disclosed to a third party. No identifiers such as names or pictures were disclosed in the article or while conducting the study. The zoom workshop setting allowed participants to remain anonymous as they could keep their cameras turned off and use the "private chat" option as they felt fit. They were asked to keep their display names as the name of any character from a book, film or television show so as to preserve their privacy. Their identities were kept confidential, even from other participants to ensure their safety and comfort and allow them to freely share their opinions.

In addition to this, trigger and content warnings were issued before discussing any heavy issue which could potentially have harmed are shown seeing the mental health of involved parties. Ethical guidelines of research were followed.

Sample

The sample consisted of 10 non-binary and transgender urban Indian teens aged 14 to 19 years old. They hailed from metropolitan cities all over India: New Delhi, Mumbai, Pune, Kolkata, and Chennai. All of the participants did have a level of economic privilege, access to the internet and social media. They were English speaking and had received education ranging from post-secondary to undergraduate students.

Scales/Tools/Instruments Used

Two zoom focus groups of 4 and 5 participants respectively were organised. These were, then, recorded and transcribed. The focus group sessions lasted over 2 hours each, and the discussion centred around eliciting in-depth accounts of the participants' opinions on Indian media. The group setting encouraged discussion and debate with participants stating opinions that both agreed and disagreed with the others. The participants chosen did not conform to conventional cis-normative gender roles or sexualities.

Data Collection Procedure

Through open-ended questions and a semi-structured conversation, the participants had the opportunity to express their opinions and views freely as well as talk about more personal experiences. The questions prepared beforehand were open-ended and general, as the aim was to let the conversation lead itself. While the discussion revolved around the central aim of the research, it was allowed, even encouraged to take its own direction. This helped understand which parts of the problem were more significant to the participants and which they gave more focus to independent of the influence that a structured interview would have had. Some questions were used to start the conversation, such as:

I. Are there any movies that had a significant (positive/negative) impact or influence on your relationship with your gender?
II. How do you feel about the current state of representation in Indian movies? Is there a sufficient number of trans and nonbinary characters?

Instead of questions that alluded to a positive or negative impact, the questions revolved around how representation had affected the way they saw themselves and their gender, or how it shaped their interactions with others around them.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis of thus gathered qualitative data allowed the discovery of patterns and commonalities in the participants' statements. More specifically, an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach (IPA) was adopted to elicit the voice of the participants' and understand the way in which and the degree of impact representation in movies had on their lives. IPA is a descriptive form of analysis that focuses on how individuals make sense of their experiences. It is centred on how people perceive and talk about objects and events, instead of a description based on a predetermined categorical system or criteria (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). For this research study, the approach was chosen as the emphasis was on trans individuals and their lives. This was done in accordance with the guidelines of IPA:

- Immersing in the data by listening to and transcribing the video recordings while making notes;
- Re-reading the notes and studying the related data to convert them into emergent themes;
- Forging relationships between the emergent themes in order to group them to form the final themes.

This allowed for the observation of whether the participants had similar views and infer the underlying reasons behind their statements.

Results

Table 1. Thematic Analysis of the responses in the focus group.

Theme/Discourse	Example Quote
The perception of trans identities	Forest - We're either the target of every joke or demonised. It's like we're dangerous, we're serial killers, perverts, evil deviants, because why else would you wear a dress if you're a "man"? And people's only reference for trans individuals is these psychotic evil characters. That's why people think trans women are men possessed by ghosts or the spirit of a woman. That's why I used to think that.
The difficulties surrounding "coming out"	Sam Winchester - It took a long time to come to terms with my gender identity. The thing is, I've always felt like this. For me, it wasn't a foreign feeling, for everyone else around me, it might've been but for me, this was normal. Misrepresentation made me feel like I'm straight and cisgender because if I'm not, then this is the stereotype attached to it. The first thought that came to my mind when I was questioning my gender

	was "what about my parents" I didn't know how they would handle me being trans.
Harms of Misrepresentation	Forest - It's fostered so much fear in me, the very idea of talking about my identity and people finding out I'm trans, the sense of being seen as a monster, knowing that my identity either scares people or is seen as a joke. It's terrifying
The struggles with coming to terms with one's gender identities	Dean: Growing up, if something is presented to you in a certain manner, your first thought is not to question it. When we're younger, we blindly accept what's given to us because that's the way we've been raised. Sam Winchester - It takes much longer for a person to come out if they don't have an accepting community… I think that the misrepresentation that they give makes it hard to come out. Because, especially with so much binary representation, I had to explain to my best friend what this means when I came out to her. She didn't know what it meant; she had never heard of it. So, movies telling children that, "Hey, gender incongruence is okay." would go a very long way. Percy Jackson - The depiction of gender in movies is so binary - you were born like this; you have to behave in only these ways. That's how it's shown in movies and that's how they want us to behave. It doesn't give you any room to breathe, experiment and figure out who you really are because you're supposed to behave like this. If you don't, you're weird and they'll show you as a demon in horror movies
Internalised Transphobia and Self-Hatred	Percy - "Growing up, if I had had representation that was more accurate, understanding my identity would have been so much easier. I'd probably feel more comfortable with my feelings, and who I was. I remember looking at how trans people are depicted and thinking, I'm not like that, I'm not scary or dangerous or evil, so that can't be me. I can't be trans." Dean - I'm still scarred. Representation like this, when we see that this is what trans women are like, I'd be like "no thank you, I don't want anything to do with them" but in this case, I am the "them"

Lack of Nuance	Sam - As you can see, I fluctuate, I changed my pronouns thrice in this zoom call. But I know my identity is not my entire personality, they're separate things. And I would like to see a representation where you're trans, but that's not everything there is to you. A lot of people tell me that I make my gender identity my entire personality. It's not like I want to but the only other option is to hide it. If I'm not vocal about my gender, then you invalidate and question it, like "are you trans or non-binary?" Forest: And having men play trans women, like in Lakshmi, stresses very cliche stereotypical parts of transness to the point that it was a mockery. Trans people are normal people, not what it's shown as.
Unrelatable Representation	Baymax - "I don't have a positive queer character to look up to yet." Percy - Percy Jackson. I dressed up like him and I used to write from his character's point of view. I think that was very instrumental in me realising that I identified as a demi-boy even though I was assigned female at birth. Forest - Honestly, I just want to see one show or one movie where there's more than just one character. Like, everyone in my chosen family and friend circle is queer. But I feel like they're so afraid to add more than one character who is a minority. Because they're token characters, and we're so much more than that. I want to see an autistic non-binary person of colour because that's who I am. People with that much intersection exist. Maeve: Incorporate real trans people in the process of making movies. Don't demonise them and their characters or make being trans a bad thing, because it isn't. Baymax: How to make it better? Go to the community you're trying to represent and ask them. If you're representing the trans community, if you have a trans character, use trans actors. Don't hire someone from outside the community to represent the community?

Discussion

This research study aimed to explore the lived experiences of gender nonbinary Indian youth through their perspectives of non-binary characters, gender portrayals, and related themes in Indian movies. In this section, the responses (Figure 1) have been analysed thematically. There are 3 themes, each with subthemes.

Theme 1: A feeling of alienation from the rest of the world

The first theme covers the impact of representation on the trans community's relationship with the rest of society. The sub themes of this theme are:

1. The Perception of Trans Identities,
2. The Difficulties surrounding "Coming Out" and
3. The Harms of Misrepresentation

The trans community in India has barely any representation in movies and media. When it is there, it misrepresents the people and further marginalises a marginalised community. A majority population does not have proper information or awareness about the plight of the trans community in India. Their interaction with trans individuals and exposure to their struggles are limited. Based on the results, it is evident that the participants all shared a high level of self-awareness and insight about the impact media representation had on their lives. A majority of the respondents expressed discontentment with the current state of media representation. Furthermore, most of them recognised the impact that the aforementioned representation had on their personal lives.

More specifically, the study revealed that media representation for transgender individuals was, in most cases, either absent altogether or detrimental to the very people it hoped to uplift. A striking lack of representation characterised the Indian film industry. This was directly connected to a lack of societal awareness about the community. For the participants, it related to their interpersonal relationships with friends and family, not knowing how they would react.

The perception of trans identities

Trans people already exist on the borders of society and are seen as social outcasts. Owing to severe underrepresentation, when a movie has a single trans character, they become a way to judge the entire community. The absence of information and awareness in mainstream media leads to poorly portrayed and demonised characters becoming the basis for forming opinions on the entire community.

This was evident when cases like the villains like **Lajja Shankar Pandey in 'Sangharsh',** who kidnapped and sacrificed children, or **Maharani's character in 'Sadak',** a trans woman who runs a brothel, kidnaps, kills and forces young women to work for her as prostitutes, came up in one of Forest's answers despite them not having seen either of these movies.

The Difficulties Surrounding "Coming Out"

These characters become stereotypes attached to the community. When millions of people, who have no idea about the binary and non-binary aspects of gender and the trans community, are exposed to the current state of representation, it leads to more harm than good. Movies and characters become all you know about the community. So, the representation being inaccurate and demonising causes real harm to trans individuals. For many individuals, the lack of information regarding non-binary gender identities and expression in media made it much harder to explain their gender to others.

This makes it unsafe for trans individuals to come out to their friends and family, as they have no way to gauge their reaction to trans people beforehand. Adding to that, the burden to educate is shifted entirely to members

of the community. The fear ingrained in them while explaining gender, sex, and gender expression when it relates directly to them and their relationship with the person can be extremely mentally taxing. This can even push trans individuals to suppress their identities and try to portray themselves as someone they aren't.

Harms of Misrepresentation

While the respondents didn't relate to how trans people were shown in movies, they did recognise that is how they were perceived. When most people found out they were trans, they stopped seeing them as complete people. Their view became tainted with images of these characters.

When asked about the harms of misrepresentation, Dean's answer was a mere two words, but its impact remained for the rest of the discussion. *"Hate crimes*

Lacking a sense of belonging within the community:

The second theme covers a greater degree of impact of representation on the transgender youth themselves. The sub themes of this theme are:

1. The Struggles while coming to terms with Gender Identity and
2. Internalised Transphobia and Self-Hatred

Lack of representation led to a feeling of isolation amongst the members of the community as they struggled to survive in a world that clearly did not see them. Moreover, the exploration of their own gender identity became tougher and more abstract. A common sentiment expressed was that of disgust towards these characters, which in multiple cases, seemed to translate into disgust towards transgender people, more specifically themselves.

The Struggles while coming to terms with Gender Identity

The participants all shared a feeling of detachment from how trans characters were portrayed on screen. They talked about how they were grossly misrepresented and demonised, linking that to not being able to come to terms with their gender identity.

Instead of using the power media holds to make positive change and encourage people to be more accepting of various gender identities, it was used to push the same narrative of trans individuals being dangerous and "different." This was expressed by both Sam and Percy while being a part of different focus groups.

Internalised Transphobia and self-hatred

Seeing the trans community through the lens of movies and media, not only made it harder for members of the community to own their gender but also translated into internalised transphobia even after becoming part of the community.

The way that statement was phrased equates being trans to being scary, dangerous and evil. It reveals how the representation in media enforces these stereotypes onto the trans individuals themselves. They begin to see these traits as associated with trans individuals which foster feelings of self-hatred and isolation.

The sentiment that they couldn't be trans was common amongst the participants. It shows how movies and media representation had made trans identities into a concept they wanted to distance themselves from. This can be seen in Dean's reaction to a clip from the recently released movie Laxmii which shows a trans character in the form of a ghost.

Not seeing yourself in the characters

The third theme covers the nature of representation. The sub themes of this theme are:
1. Lack of nuance and
2. Unrelatable Characters

When present, the representation misconstrued the realities of transgender individuals, instead either choosing to show them as demonic evil characters or reducing them to shallow tropes. It pushed a narrative where the transgender community was dangerous and directly negatively influenced the general public's perception of them. The representation resulted in a sense of detachment from the characters, and by extension from their gender identity and the community as a whole.

Lack of nuance

The characters are shown lacking nuance and a personality. It is important to see oneself reflected in the media, have characters to relate to, the knowledge that one is not alone and that society recognizes one's identity. This is taken away from trans individuals, as their representation in Indian movies actively makes their lives tougher. Trans characters in the media have their transness as all that there is about them. This contrasts with real trans people, who are complex individuals with interests, hobbies, flaws and passions.

Additionally, often cisgender men are hired to play trans women in media. This further perpetuates the idea that trans women are just men in disguise. Even in the movie Lakshmi, Akshay Kumar was asked to walk a very "girly" walk and accentuate the stereotypical "trans characteristics". What this does essentially, reduces the character to a performance of transness. The person who is a complex nuanced character gets reduced to their transness which is only one aspect of their identity and is made to put up a superficial display of masculinity, femininity or androgyny.

Unrelatable characters

When asked about characters or movies that helped with their gender awakening, silence overtook the meeting. No one had any trans character that they had been able to look up to as children.

When the scope of answers was widened beyond Indian media and trans characters, the responses changed. Sam spoke about the mom from the TV show 'One Day at a Time' and how seeing an accepting parent made them feel that their parents could accept them someday too. Percy's answer was about their realisation of their gender.

Having characters to relate to and to see oneself in is extremely crucial. Good representation can make it easier for the community, and their friends and family. It makes the journey of coming to terms with your gender a little less filled with hate. With a few small steps, the media industry can become more inclusive of trans people and their experiences.

A common point brought up by the participants, when asked how they felt Indian media could improve in its representation of trans individuals, was that of more involvement. Having trans people be a part of the process, as script-writers, actors, directors not only ensures that the movie doesn't offend the sentiments of the community but also helps uplift the community by providing them livelihood and a platform for sharing their stories.

It is more than high time that trans individuals are involved in the conversation about their rights, their representation and their lives. Lack of representation, and further yet, misrepresentation have huge detriments to trans people's lives, their relationship with their gender, their friends and family, and their place in society.

Conclusion and Implications

More representation, overall, would mitigate the harms of the misrepresentation since there would be a larger scope of representation to reflect the community, instead of some selectively negative pieces. The most obvious impact would be an increase in awareness regarding non-binary and transgender identities. This would, consequently, help normalise and encourage questioning one's gender and exploring one's self-identification amongst society as a whole.

This research tried to address some of the larger concerns with Indian media representation of the minority transgender community. It involved transgender voices in the conversation, seeking out their perspective in place of speaking on their behalf. Over the course of the paper, the primary issues with media representation today surfaced. A corrective course of action was provided, that suggested incorporating transgender individuals in the process of creating the media in the first place. These findings should be of value to the Indian film industry and anyone else hoping to represent transgender individuals. Media has immense power to shape society's worldview. It can mould how an entire group of people is seen and has been used to do exactly that throughout history. Whether this platform is used for the better, or for worse, is the decision resting.

Limitations

It is important to point out that the results of this study cannot be generalised for transgender individuals across the board. The participants all hailed from a similar background of economic privilege and had access to resources like social media. Additionally, since the discussion took place in a group setting, their responses had the potential and capacity to influence each other.

Acknowledgments

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