

Women of Real and Virtual World: Exploring the Opportunities and Challenges During COVID 19

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Abstract: Covid-19 has made our world virtual. The limiting of personal contact and the use of new technologies has made it more virtual in this time. The time spent with the real world has been almost equal to the time spent with virtual world during the lockdown period. With the advent of new communication technologies, the gap between the real and virtual world have narrowed down. The virtual world has become a reality as people are spending their maximum time with it and consuming much more as compare to earlier times. The virtual world has all the physical characteristics that a real world possess. It represents the actual world and the society we see around. So, it is obvious for us to think there is similarities between the two worlds of women too. Representation of women in the virtual world is the mirror image of the women of real world. This study is done from the time of Covid-19, to understand if women of real world are same as represented in the virtual world or there lies a difference in the representations and their situations. It also discusses the differences, opportunities and challenges of women belonging to both the world. To attain the objectives, case studies of women representing both the world have been done.

Keywords: Virtual World, Real World, New Media, Covid-19, Women

I. INTRODUCTION

Media is known as the mirror of the modern society. It reflects our society and depicts what and how it works. Media through messages create realities and reflect it in the society. The media despite being a virtual world, represents the real society and real characters. It has often given us an impression that whatever we see in the screen resembles our life. The virtual images and characters created by different media like television, social media and online streaming is a representation of our reality. Through storytelling methods, it depicts our life, our story, problems and celebrations. It represents and imitates the real world's characters and their journey of opportunities and challenges. Thus, bringing together both the world together, where one represents the other. Covid-19 has made our world virtual. The limiting of personal contact and the use of new technologies has made it more virtual in this time. The time spent with the real world has been almost equal to the time spent with virtual world during the lockdown period. As we had to restrict ourselves to the houses for the safety purposes during Covid-19 so to sustain life and livelihood, we had to adopt the virtual world.

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Due to the closure of multiplexes and limited content of television, the users shifted their preference to social media, Over-the-top (OTT) platforms and online gaming for entertainment. The time spent with online streaming like OTT platforms or gaming has increased. With the advent of such new communication technologies, the gap between the real and virtual world have narrowed down. The virtual world has become a reality as people are spending their maximum time with it and consuming much more as compare to earlier times. The Indians are now more into the virtual world for entertainment and infotainment. They have started creating their ideologies of real world on such representations of the media-created virtual world. This has also led to the ideology that the women representing the virtual is same as the women of real world. Their life, their problems, opportunities are same during the coronavirus pandemic. The virtual media presents a mirror image of the real-world women through different mass media contents.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Beyond just mirroring reality, representations in the media such as in film, television, photo-graph and print journalism create reality and normalise specific world-views or ideologies beyond just mirroring reality, representations in the media such as in film, television, photo- graph and print journalism create reality and normalise specific world-views or ideologies beyond just mirroring reality, representations in the media such as in film, television, photo- graph and print journalism create reality and normalise specific world-views or ideologies The media create representations as central signifying practices for producing shared meaning (Hall, 1997). The representations are constitutive of culture, meaning and knowledge about ourselves and the world around us The virtual world has all the physical characteristics that a real world possess. It represents the actual world and the society we see around. So, it is obvious for us to think there is similarities between the two worlds. The virtual world reflects the real world through media images, visuals, characters and narratives. Hence, the virtual reality is a representation of an actual world.¹ Such representation has gone wider after out shift from the traditional media towards the new media. With the internet, old concepts such as mass media have been changed and new concepts such as virtual reality and virtual community have been introduced ² (Schramm, 1997). The new media technologies which grew with the usage of internet have created the virtual realities which are representation of the real world.

They have given a perception that the way people present themselves and perceive themselves in a virtual world is same as the real world. An important factor in the development of the media and the technological advances is that it has gave more power to the construction of reality.³ The media has strong effects on the individual and subjective perception of reality. Especially medium of visual communications, can shape the picture of reality in the receivers' minds.⁴ The virtual media being more visual than the other medium of mass communication has the advantage over other in shaping the reality in the people's mind more effectively through representation. Such representation of the media creates a meaning of the real world we live in. Even Hall (1997) has argued that the representations that are created by the media are constitutive of culture, meaning and knowledge about ourselves and the world around us.⁵ We gather our knowledge on the situation, the event, situation, people of the real world after watching the representations in the virtual world to form our opinions and ideologies. Further such representation in media creates the ideologies. It could influence the way certain stories are represented in the virtual media. Beyond just mirroring reality, representations in the media create reality and normalize specific world-views or ideologies.⁶ Thus there is an importance of media ideology as it influences the opinions. It leads to social construction of reality and ideologies.

III. OBJECTIVES

1. To study the representation of women in the media-generated virtual world during the pandemic.
2. To make a situational analysis of women of real world during the Covid-19.
3. To study the differences, opportunities and challenges of women living in both the world.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To attain the objectives, case studies of both the world of women, the real and virtual world, have been done. The studies are done from the time of Covid-19 to understand if women of real world are same as represented in the virtual world or there lies a difference in the representations and their situations. Social Media, OTT platforms and Online gaming have been taken to study the representation of women in the virtual world. Whereas to study the women of real world, different news items were collected related to Covid-19 crisis.

Case Study I: Women of Virtual World social media

With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the use of social media as a communication tool has increased. The Indian women has used this virtual space like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram to connect with the outside world. This virtual media has given an opportunity to women to raise their voice and expresses their concern on various issues during the pandemic. The women within the four walls of their houses found this virtual media an effective way of expressing themselves and their concerns related to the pandemic, Social media activism gain momentum with online petitions. The women of social media, taking initiative, started it against domestic violence, food

security, attack on health workers, equal sharing of household works. They started such petitions against issues that were cause of concern to them, other women or society during the pandemic. Since the outbreak, India has witnessed more than 2000 petitions on the Change.org virtual platform. When we looked at the number of petitions able to cross the 100-signature benchmark, only 17% started by men were successful in compare to 40% reaching the 100-signature benchmark by Indian women.⁷

Women have marked their strong presence with selfies, hashtags campaigns and challenges like posting of Black and White pictures for supporting each other. They have been posting black-and-white images of themselves on Instagram and other social media platforms to support each other for women's empowerment. These images are accompanied by the caption #challengeaccepted.⁸

They have flaunted off their new attires, fashions, posted precautionary measures related to coronavirus, health tips, given likes and dislikes. They were quiet active in Posting videos acknowledging the contributions of corona warriors and to support women working in frontlines. They have also given their blunt views on government's political acts, measures to combat Covid-19 and decisions related to reduction of fees, conduct of examinations and online classes from time to time. They have even used this virtual platform extensively for to grow in business, promote sales and deliver online consultancy on beauty, health and food during the lockdown process. According to the report, women business owners on Facebook report the helpfulness of social media to their business at a rate that is statistically higher than their male counterparts.⁹

Thus, we could see the women of this virtual world have been able to impact, express and empowered themselves and others using this virtual platform. It has also helped them to reduce isolation and boredom and come out of their anxiety and fear related to the deadly virus. Their leadership role in this virtual world has implied gender equity and female activism.

OTT Platforms

Indian media witness a major shift from the conventional media to the Over-the-Top (OTT)Platform during the lockdown. The shutting down of movie theatres expedite this process much more. The OTT platform has come with many news contents for its consumers. One of the majors is rising of female-centric new contents during the lockdown. They have created a new identity of Indian women through various new content based on them. From YouTube to Netflix to Amazon Prime, Alt Balaji, ZEE5 and regional OTT platforms like Hoichoi, all have been focusing on content that have strong women characters as lead protagonists and most have been able to break gender stereotypes stories.¹⁰

They have come with many women-centric web series portraying strong female images and narratives. The series visually portrays the progressive carefree and daring female characters. An OTT platform that creates more space for women-centric stories.

Series like *Aarya*, *Four More Shots*, *Hundres*, *Chokes*, *A suitable Bride*, *A married women*, *Queen*, *Bombay Begums*, *She*, many such have come with women-centric characters and representations. This virtual world is introducing to more independent, strong and progressive women. The women characters of the stories hold a different mindset from the existing traditional Indian values of the time. They are bold enough to reject the cultural and social stigmas. They are breaking the old patriarchal system for making their own identity and putting their preference. The representation of women through this medium has set an example for the traditional media. It is high time they should follow the changes and stop stereotyping. The female protagonist is more prominent than the male protagonist¹¹ in this virtual world. OTT platform has also increased the chances of hiring actresses with these remarkable changes. This will bring more work opportunities for women and women-oriented scripts to the forefronts.

Virtual Gaming

India witnesses a surge in online gaming during this pandemic. It was another way to connect with friends and the community staying at home or in isolations. The gaming time of India's mobile users shows that the average time spent on games increased in a year of lockdown. More and more people also joined this mobile gaming virtual world because of the free space and time they got because of the lockdown. The online gaming become a social lifeline for many as it was only way of connecting with the people being in isolation. During this time, we could also see the increase popularity of many female characters in the game with the increase of more real females as gamers. Many female characters of Indian-based games joined to the popular list of the same of the world-wide playable characters. They have also been added to the covers of console video games. Indian female characters representation like *Mira* from *Dreamfall Chapters*, *Symmetra* (Satya Vaswani) from *Overwatch*, *Farah* from *Prince of Persia Series*, *Lakshmi Bai* and *Devi Nayar* from *The Order 1886* from the gaming world went popular among the players during the pandemic. These characters are well-equipped with weapons and known for their strength and independent nature. These characters have entered to the male -dominated virtual media of video games breaking the stereotypes. They are equal powerful, strong and fearless as the male characters in carrying out the missions within the game. The increase of female users in virtual gaming shows that the women have adapted news technologies rapidly during lockdown imposed of Covid-19. It further established that it would help reduce the gender digital divide in India

Case Study II: Women from Real World

But when we study the Covid-hit real-world, we can see that the pandemic has hit the women more in compare to men. It has been worse for the Indian women. Many women in India lost their job. The pandemic took away 114 million jobs across the globe and the employment loss for women was at 5 per cent compared to 3.9 per cent for men.¹¹ Only 19 percent of working women remained employed and 47 percent suffered a permanent job loss.¹² COVID-19 pandemic are having devastating effects on working women, as 51 per cent of those surveyed are less

optimistic about their career prospects.¹³ In another survey by the Nudge Foundation, it found that the women had to dip into their savings as faced issues related to food and health as there was 76 percent reduction on their weekly income.¹⁴ The women faced more violence during the lockdown as compare to the early years. The National Commission for Women received 23,722 complaints in 2020, which was the highest in six years. Of these, 7,708 complaints were received under the 'right to live with dignity' clause.¹⁵ Such rises in cases throw light on the absence of social equity in our society and the rising emotional abuse face by the women during the pandemic. Domestic violence, alcohol addiction, torture of in-laws has adversely impacted the married life of the women leading to marital discord. India patriarchal society once again was the cause of concern during the pandemic. The society which does not prioritize girl's education even today got exposed again. 10 million girls dropped out from the secondary schools in absence of internet access and gender inequalities in different parts of India.¹⁶ The pandemic has widened the gender inequalities that is prevalent in our society from ages. The gender gap could also be observed in the vaccination drive. Only 867 women got Covid shot per 1,000 men.¹⁷ Low literacy and digital divide among women have widen this vaccination gap. It created a general distress among the women and the mental health issues linked to the lockdown increased. The rising atrocities and the anxiety and burden of managing livelihood has impacted the mental health of the women. Covid-19 has put an adverse impact on breastfeeding, pregnancy, menstruation and the maternal health of the women in India. It has lowered the women's wellbeing and freedom. Intensive workload on domestic front and the pressure to manage work along with other responsibilities have taken a toll on their physical, emotional and psychological state of mind. They would take long to recover from these challenges and negative impacts of the Covid-19.

V. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Both the case studies show a opposite trend in the presentation of women in Indian during the Covid-19. The virtual world that is expected to be similar to the real world, is not to the expectation. The representation of women in the virtual world was very different to the real world. Neither the virtual world looks like the real nor the vice-versa.

Opportunities and challenges

While the virtual media talks about the opportunities. The women of real world were struggling with the challenges of the COVID-19. The virtual media portray a strong and independent woman who is taking leadership in the society. While we could see in reality, the women are struggling to strike a balance between the family, job and their mental wellbeing. The former has failed to reflect the real world and the women living in it. The construction of reality of the women by the virtual world are far from the real women of India.

The virtual media offer a suitable and progressive society for Indian women. It has no effects of pandemic on its characters nor the changes within the society have any adverse effect on them. On the contrary the women from the real world seem to be the worst affected. Women belonging to each and every section are going through sufferings and hardship during this crucial time. The women from virtual world are taking a leading role. They are strong and empowered and acting as a catalyst to change society and influence the masses.

VI. CONCLUSION

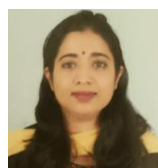
The media has been always criticized for their portrayal of women in the screen. They have been blamed for objectifying and stereotyping women. But the virtual media shows that they have moved from underrepresentation of the women towards more progressive representation. The virtual media with its diverse storytelling features are sharing women perspective elaborately. They are going deep on gender equity and celebrating the diversity of women's voice. There is progress in the representation of women. Female voices and female-centric characters now dominate the virtual media. The women representing the virtual world are bringing about a change in feminism and its ideologies. In contrast, the real world has opened up more to a patriarchal society in India. The pandemic has strengthened and intensified this trend. The Indian women are not only fighting with the fear of pandemic but also with the mindset of a gender-biased society. From job opportunities, to education, to health and vaccine, women are contending with stronger gender bias across all states of India. The impact of the covid-19 pandemic has hit women harder. It has not only affected them emotionally, but psychologically and physically too. The virtual screen is treated important as it will construct a reality for all. It was assumed that media representation of women in the virtual world will create their identity in the real world. The virtual world will be the mirror of the real world. But this was not true during COVID-19. A wide difference in the two worlds and in the women representing both could be observed. The reality and ideology of women of both the world was different. The virtual world was full of opportunities for them while the real world made them face new challenges in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis.

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AUTHOR PROFILE



Dr. Sagarika Dash, Associate Professor. Department of Mass Communication Shri Guru Ram Rai University. Dehradun. Uttarakhand Email: drsagarikadash@gmail.com Holding 13 years teaching experience in education sector and has demonstrated a strong work ethic and advanced interpersonal skills by effectively serving various educational media institutions. Awarded Doctorate of Philosophy (Ph.d.) in Mass Communication in 2015 by HNB Garhwal (Central) University, Srinagar, Uttarakhand under the guidance of Prof. Asharam Dangwal, Head of Centre of Journalism and Mass Communication, HNB Garhwal University, Srinagar. Topic "Changing scenario of news coverage by newspapers and TV channels (with special reference to uttarakhand)". Society has fixed standards and rules to differentiate the masculine and female identities. My interest subsequently through my various research is to analyze the dynamics and disparity related to the gender and measure the gender equality.