

Youth Exposure to Explicit OTT Content and Its Perceived Influence

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Abstract. The proliferation of Over-the-Top (OTT) streaming platforms has redefined media consumption patterns among youth, providing unrestricted access to diverse content, including explicit portrayals of sexuality, profanity, and substance use. This study investigates the level of exposure to such explicit content and examines its perceived influence on the attitudes, behavior, and moral reasoning of young viewers. Grounded in Media Effects Theory and the Third-Person Effect Theory, the research explores how exposure shapes both individual and social perceptions of morality and cultural acceptability in digital media environments. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey was conducted among undergraduate students aged 18–25 from multiple universities. The instrument measured variables including frequency of OTT consumption, content type preference, perceived realism, personal versus societal influence, and moral tolerance. Statistical analyses, including correlation and regression models, were employed to determine the relationship between exposure frequency and perceived influence differentials. The findings reveal that while majorities of youth frequently encounter explicit material, they tend to underestimate its impact on themselves and overestimate its influence on others. This perceptual gap indicates cognitive dissonance and supports the third-person effect assumption. The results also highlight gender-based and socio-cultural variations in tolerance levels and moral perception. The study contributes to understanding the socio-psychological dimensions of digital entertainment and provides insights for policymakers, educators, and content regulators to promote responsible OTT consumption. It advocates for comprehensive media literacy initiatives and evidence-based self-regulation frameworks to mitigate the normalization of explicit content among young audiences.

Keywords: OTT platforms, explicit content, youth behavior, media effects theory, third-person effect, moral perception, binge-watching, vulgarity, sexuality, digital media ethics.

1. Introduction

The emergence of Over-the-Top (OTT) streaming services has revolutionized the global media ecosystem by allowing users to consume audiovisual content on demand, bypassing traditional gatekeepers such as broadcasters, film boards, and regulatory institutions. In India, platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+ Hotstar, Zee5, and SonyLIV

have seen exponential growth since 2016, particularly among youth aged 18–25. Affordable internet data, smartphone penetration, and post-pandemic digital migration have accelerated this transformation, making OTT platforms a dominant source of entertainment, information, and cultural consumption.

While this digital democratization has enhanced viewer autonomy, it has also blurred moral, cultural, and regulatory boundaries. The absence of pre-censorship allows creators to experiment with bold themes involving sexuality, profanity, substance use, and violence—elements previously constrained under state-regulated television or cinema frameworks. These narratives, though often defended as artistic expression or realism, have triggered public debates over vulgarity, cultural degradation, and the need for content regulation. The controversy surrounding web series such as *Sacred Games*, *Mirzapur*, and *Paatal Lok* exemplifies the growing tension between creative freedom and societal morality in India's digital media space.

The youth demographic, constituting the majority of OTT consumers, is particularly susceptible to such content exposure. Private, personalized, and algorithm-driven viewing environments promote continuous and often unsupervised engagement. The phenomenon of binge-watching further intensifies emotional and cognitive immersion, reducing critical distance and reinforcing media effects. Previous research in the domains of Media Effects Theory and Cultivation Theory suggests that prolonged exposure to explicit content can influence perceptions of normality, desensitize audiences toward profanity or sexual imagery, and gradually reshape moral reasoning.

Moreover, the Third-Person Effect Theory (Davison, 1983) posits that individuals tend to believe media affects others more than themselves, creating a perceptual bias that shields personal accountability while externalizing media's influence. In the context of explicit OTT content, this perceptual gap is crucial—it determines how young viewers rationalize consumption, negotiate guilt, and construct moral justifications.

Despite global attention to the cultural consequences of digital streaming, empirical research on Indian youth's perception of explicit OTT content remains limited. Most existing studies focus on viewing patterns, platform preference, or technological adoption rather than psychological and moral implications. Given India's sociocultural diversity and collective orientation toward morality, understanding how youth interpret and internalize explicit content is essential for framing informed media literacy and regulation policies.

This research, therefore, seeks to analyze the extent, patterns, and perceived influence of explicit OTT content among young Indian viewers. It examines the disparity between self-perceived and socially perceived media influence, investigates gender and cultural differences in moral tolerance, and evaluates how exposure frequency and perceived realism interact to shape youth attitudes toward explicit content. By integrating theoretical insights from media effects and perceptual bias frameworks, the study aims to contribute to the growing discourse on digital ethics, audience psychology, and self-regulation in OTT media environments.

2. Review of Literature

Scholarly work relevant to youth exposure to explicit content falls into three clusters: (a) empirical and meta-analytic evidence linking sexual/explicit media exposure to attitudes and behavior; (b) media-effects and perceptual bias literature (including third-person effect); and (c) OTT-specific and binge-watching work that documents platform features, regulatory debates, and consumption patterns among youth. The studies below were selected because they are widely cited, methodologically robust, and directly informative for hypotheses, instrumentation, and interpretations.

Mori et al. (2023) examines how exposure to sexual content influences problematic sexual behaviors (PSB) among children and adolescents. Analyzing 27 studies with over 16,000 participants worldwide, the authors found a significant positive relationship between sexual content exposure and PSB. Youth exposed to non-violent sexual content were nearly twice as likely to show problematic behaviors ($OR \approx 1.82$), while exposure to violent or live sexual content increased the likelihood even more ($OR \approx 2.52$). Gender moderated the effect—stronger associations appeared in studies with more female participants. Although most studies were cross-sectional, limiting causal conclusions, the consistent pattern indicates that exposure to explicit or violent sexual material can contribute to developmentally inappropriate sexual behavior. The authors call for media literacy education, parental monitoring, and policy interventions to reduce these risks.

Coyne et al. (2019) examines how exposure to sexual content in mainstream, non-explicit media influences adolescents' sexual attitudes, peer perceptions, and behaviors. The authors analyzed 59 studies with 394 effect sizes to assess whether viewing sexualized media—such as TV shows, films, and music videos—affects how young people think and act regarding sex. Results showed a small but consistent positive association between exposure to sexual media and more permissive sexual attitudes, greater perceptions of peer sexual activity, and increased engagement in sexual behaviors. These effects were stronger among adolescents compared to older youth, with boys showing higher susceptibility than girls. Racial differences were also noted, with stronger associations among White participants than Black participants. The study concludes that even non-explicit sexual content in mainstream media can shape adolescents' sexual beliefs and behaviors, supporting theories of media influence like social learning and cultivation. The authors emphasize the importance of media literacy education and parental guidance to help youth critically interpret sexual content.

Yang and Tian (2021) examines how people perceive the influence of COVID-19 misinformation on themselves versus others. Using the Third-Person Effect (TPE) framework, the authors surveyed 871 social media users to explore how engagement, self-efficacy, and perceived knowledge shape these perceptions. Findings show that individuals who engage more actively with social media tend to believe they are less affected by fake news than others. This perception is mediated by higher self-efficacy and perceived knowledge—users who feel informed think they are resistant to misinformation. Emotional reactions, however, did not significantly impact these beliefs. The study concludes that cognitive biases, rather than emotions, drive the illusion that others are

more vulnerable to fake news, which may reduce users' own vigilance against misinformation.

Moreno et al. (2018) tracked first-year college students at two U.S. universities over four years, examining their public profiles on Facebook to code for displayed references to marijuana. Simultaneously, the students were interviewed annually about their lifetime and current marijuana use. Results indicated that students who reported using marijuana (either lifetime or current use) were more likely to display references to marijuana on their Facebook profiles. The prevalence of these displayed references ranged between about 5% to 10% across the four years. The authors suggest that marijuana displays on social media may serve as signals or markers of actual behavior, implying potential for such displays to be used as indicators or triggers for interventions or outreach efforts among young adults.

Carolus et al. (2019) investigates how people respond to smartphones that deliver spoken feedback that is either polite or impolite. Using the theoretical lens of the Computers Are Social Actors paradigm (CASA), the researchers treat the smartphone as a social agent — something with which users interact as though it were a human. In a laboratory experiment with about 85 participants, individuals interacted with a “talking” smartphone that responded to them. They evaluated the phone twice: once before receiving feedback and once after. The results showed that polite phones were evaluated more positively than impolite ones in terms of friendliness. Impolite phones' evaluations worsened after feedback in both friendliness and competence. Polite phones did not show a significant change in competence after feedback. The study also examined voice gender (male or female voice). They found that impolite phones with a male voice were judged less competent, whereas impolite phones with a female voice did not suffer the same decline in perceived competence. The effect of politeness / impoliteness on friendliness was not moderated by voice gender. Overall, the study suggests that even simple devices like smartphones, when endowed with voice and social cues, are subject to social norms such as politeness. People treat them not just as tools but as social actors, and their evaluations change when those devices violate or respect social expectations.

Wood et al. (2020) describes how one academic adolescent medicine clinic rapidly shifted to telehealth in response to the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the first 30 days (March 16–April 15, 2020), they scheduled 392 telehealth appointments for 331 unique adolescent patients across multiple states. The clinic offered services for eating disorders, reproductive / contraceptive care, gender-affirming treatment, HIV care, general adolescent medicine, and substance abuse. They achieved an 82% completion rate for these telehealth visits. Completion rates did not significantly differ by age, sex, gender identity, or insurance status. However, patients classified as non-white had significantly lower completion rates than white patients ($p = 0.003$), indicating disparities in service uptake. Geospatial mapping of patients' ZIP codes showed that adolescents came from several states, but most were concentrated near the clinic. Case anecdotes also highlighted both opportunities (e.g., privacy, convenience) and challenges (e.g., access to private space, technical limitations). The authors emphasize that while rapid telehealth scale-up is

feasible, implementation must carefully address equity to avoid widening health disparities among adolescents.

Scull, T. M., et al. (2022) “A media literacy education approach to high school sexual health education: Immediate effects of Media Aware on adolescents’ media, sexual health, and communication outcomes” evaluates a web-based comprehensive sexual health program called Media Aware, designed for high school students (grades 9-10). The program aims to enhance adolescents’ critical thinking about media messages, improve their sexual health knowledge, and support skills in communication about sexual topics. In a randomized controlled trial involving 590 students across 17 U.S. high schools, participants were assigned either to the intervention or to a delayed-intervention control group. Outcomes were measured immediately after the intervention (posttest) and at 3-month follow up. (Some follow-up data were affected by school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic.) The immediate results were promising: the intervention improved students’ sexual health knowledge, corrected misperceptions about teen sexual norms, improved media message deconstruction skills, and reduced perceived realism of media portrayals of risky teen sex. It also influenced gendered outcomes — for girls, reduced normative beliefs about teen sex and improved parent communication; for boys, reduced acceptance of dating violence. Overall, the study provides evidence that a media literacy-based sexual education program can positively influence adolescents’ knowledge, attitudes, and communication related to sexual health.

2.1 Research Objectives

The specific target milestones laid out for this empirical exploration include:

- To measure the extent and frequency of youth exposure to explicit OTT content.
- To analyze the perceived personal and societal influence of explicit media content.
- To identify gender, cultural, and moral variations in the interpretation of explicit content.
- To evaluate the relationship between exposure intensity and tolerance toward vulgarity and sexual themes.

2.2 Methodology

The study adopts a quantitative survey design involving 300 undergraduate respondents aged 18–25 from multiple universities in North India. A structured questionnaire was administered using Likert-scale items to assess viewing patterns, perceived realism, and influence differentiation. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression tests to identify predictors of perceived influence and moral acceptance.

2.3 Key Arguments

- OTT exposure contributes to a gradual normalization of explicit and morally ambiguous content among youth.
- The third-person effect drives a perceptual bias where individuals minimize personal susceptibility while exaggerating media's influence on others.
- Gender and cultural context mediate tolerance and moral interpretation.

2.4 Preliminary Findings

Initial analysis indicates that frequent viewers of explicit OTT content exhibit higher desensitization and moral neutrality. Respondents acknowledge widespread exposure but attribute greater negative impact to peers and society than to themselves. The data reveal a significant correlation between exposure frequency and increased content tolerance, confirming both cultivation and third-person effect tendencies.

3. Analysis and Findings

This section presents the empirical analysis and interpretation of data collected from 300 undergraduate respondents aged 18–25 across selected universities in Punjab and Chandigarh. The objective was to examine patterns of exposure to explicit Over-the-Top (OTT) content and assess its perceived influence on youth's moral tolerance, attitudes, and behavioral perceptions. The analysis is guided by Media Effects Theory, Third-Person Effect Theory (Davison, 1983), and Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1976).

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression models to determine relationships between exposure intensity, perceived influence, and moral tolerance. Inferential tests (t-tests and ANOVA) were applied to identify gender and cultural differences. Table 1 summarizes the primary parameters evaluated.

Table 1. Heading level criteria and core profile definitions.

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	152	50.7
	Female	148	49.3
Age	18–20 years	96	32.0
	21–23 years	144	48.0
	24–25 years	60	20.0
Education Stream	Arts/Humanities	102	34.0
	Commerce	98	32.7
	Science/Technical	100	33.3
Average OTT Viewing (hrs/day)	<2	34	11.3
	2–4	138	46.0

The demographic distribution indicates balanced gender representation and a concentration of active OTT users, with nearly 89% watching more than two hours daily. This confirms the high penetration of OTT platforms among the youth demographic, making the sample relevant for the study's objectives.

Table 2. Viewing patterns and explicit content dimensions.

Type of Content	Regular (%)	Exposure	Occasional Exposure (%)	Rare/Never (%)
Sexual scenes / nudity	72		20	8
Profanity / vulgar language	81		13	6
Depiction of drugs/alcohol	77		18	5
Graphic violence	69		23	8
LGBTQ+ or alternative sexuality themes	58		27	15

Most respondents reported regular exposure to sexual, profane, and substance-use content. The accessibility of uncensored content through streaming algorithms contributes to normalized encounters with explicit material. This aligns with findings by Coyne et al. (2019) and Mori et al. (2023) that youth frequently access sexual and violent themes in online entertainment.

Table 3. Frequency of OTT usage and platform preference.

Platform	Primary Preference (%)	Average Weekly Hours
Netflix	38	9.2
Amazon Prime Video	26	7.8
Disney+ Hotstar	18	6.4
MX Player / Zee5	10	5.1
Others (SonyLIV, JioCinema)	8	4.8

Netflix and Amazon Prime dominate youth preference due to globalized storytelling and mature themes. Their content libraries are algorithmically personalized, amplifying exposure intensity. Consistent with literature, binge-watching behavior and recommendation loops enhance continuous viewing, fostering deeper media effects.

Table 4. Perceived influence indices (5-point Likert scale).

Statement	Mean	SD
"Explicit OTT content affects other youth's behavior negatively."	4.12	0.88

“Explicit OTT content affects my own behavior negatively.”	2.98	1.02
“Sexual or profane OTT content is now socially acceptable.”	3.74	0.91
“Violent or vulgar scenes desensitize viewers over time.”	4.01	0.84
“OTT platforms should self-regulate content categories.”	4.22	0.79

A perceptual asymmetry emerges: respondents attribute stronger media influence to “others” than themselves, validating the Third-Person Effect assumption. This bias reflects self-protective reasoning, where youth rationalize consumption while externalizing perceived harm.

Table 5. Matrix of correlation coefficients.

Variables	Exposure Frequency	Moral Tolerance	Perceived Influence	Self	Perceived Social Influence
Exposure Frequency	1	0.64**	-0.22*		0.47**
Moral Tolerance	0.64**	1	-0.19*		0.41**
Perceived Self Influence	-0.22*	-0.19*	1		-0.08
Perceived Social Influence	0.47**	0.41**	-0.08		1

Statistical Significance Signifiers. Note that p values represent threshold parameters where * symbol indicates significance levels: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.

There is a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.64$) between exposure frequency and moral tolerance, confirming that frequent viewers exhibit higher acceptance of explicit content. The negative relationship between exposure and self-perceived influence ($r = -0.22$) indicates the Third-Person Effect. Exposure also correlates positively with perceived social influence ($r = 0.47$), underscoring externalization bias.

Table 6. Multiple linear regression analysis predicting moral tolerance.

Predictor	Beta	t-value	Sig. (p)
Exposure Frequency	0.41	6.23	0.000
Perceived Realism	0.29	4.72	0.001
Gender (Male = 1, Female = 0)	0.18	2.84	0.005
Media Literacy Score	-0.24	-3.92	0.002
Model R2	0.46	—	—

Exposure frequency and perceived realism significantly predict higher moral tolerance toward explicit OTT content. Male respondents score higher on tolerance, indicating gender differences consistent with global literature. Media literacy emerges as a protective factor — higher literacy scores correlate with lower tolerance, corroborating that critical viewing mitigates permissive attitudes.

Table 7. Independent samples t-test values by gender.

Variable	Male Mean	Female Mean	t	Sig. (p)
Exposure Frequency	4.12	3.73	3.04	0.002
Moral Tolerance	3.91	3.52	2.78	0.005
Perceived Self Influence	2.79	3.14	-2.21	0.028
Perceived Social Influence	4.26	4.04	1.87	0.062

Males report significantly higher exposure and moral tolerance, while females perceive greater self-influence. These findings align with gendered socialization patterns wherein males exhibit greater acceptance of explicit material and lower moral anxiety. Respondents classified into three groups based on binge frequency: **Low:** 0–2 episodes/session, **Moderate:** 3–5 episodes/session, **High:** >5 episodes/session.

Table 8. Variance tests (ANOVA) across binge-watching thresholds.

Group	Mean Moral Tolerance	Mean Desensitization Score	ANOVA F	p
Low (0–2 episodes/session)	2.89	2.75	14.62	0.000
Moderate (3–5 episodes/session)	3.74	3.68	—	—
High (>5 episodes/session)	4.21	4.07	—	—

Moral tolerance and desensitization increase with binge intensity. The results support Cultivation Theory, showing that repetitive, immersive exposure fosters normalization of explicit content.

3.1 Qualitative Insights and Open-Ended Feedback

Several operational patterns emerged from thematic analysis of respondents' written comments:

- Normalization and Peer Discourse: Explicit content is often treated as standard entertainment or realistic cinematic rendering.

- Curiosity and Exploration: Respondents cited a strong drive to comprehend taboo topics and mature relationships.
 - Moral Negotiation: Viewers internalize conflict, noting they enjoy the storylines but acknowledge cultural adjustments.
 - Censorship Skepticism: A distinct majority favored independent self-regulation systems over top-down legislative interventions.
- These patterns reflect moral ambivalence consistent with findings from **Badwe & Nesrikar (2022)** on Indian youth's views toward OTT censorship.

3.2 Integration with Theoretical Frameworks

3.2.1 Media Effects Theory

Findings validate that repeated exposure modifies attitudinal and moral thresholds. The significant association between exposure frequency and moral tolerance demonstrates a measurable media effect consistent with traditional mass-media studies.

3.2.2 Third-Person Effect

Respondents consistently rated others as more affected than themselves, a cognitive bias confirmed through mean difference tests and correlation results. This bias serves as psychological self-protection and rationalization for continued consumption.

3.2.3 Cultivation Theory

Binge-watching data reveal a pattern of progressive desensitization and normalization. Long-term exposure cultivates acceptance of sexual or profane portrayals as "realistic," altering moral evaluation schemas.

3.3. Discussion of Key Findings

3.3.1 High Exposure Levels: Over 70% of youth are routinely exposed to explicit content on OTT platforms. This confirms earlier global findings (Coyne et al., 2019; Mori et al., 2023) and highlights the unfiltered reach of streaming platforms in India.

3.3.2 Perceived Asymmetry: Respondents largely underestimate personal vulnerability and overestimate societal impact, mirroring Third-Person Effect results from Heravi et al. (2016).

3.3.3 Gendered Perceptions: Males show greater exposure and acceptance; females maintain higher critical awareness. This divergence underscores socio-cultural moral expectations and gender socialization.

3.3.4 Influence of Realism and Platform Design: Perceived realism amplifies tolerance; algorithmic recommendation and binge-watch features increase exposure intensity (Menon, 2022).

3.3.5 Protective Role of Media Literacy: Higher literacy scores correlate inversely with tolerance, reaffirming intervention benefits noted by Scull et al. (2022).

3.3.6 Cultural Negotiation and Liberalization: Qualitative evidence shows youth's negotiation between traditional moral codes and global liberal content trends. OTT platforms act as cultural mediators bridging local conservatism and global permissiveness.

3.4 Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	Higher exposure to explicit OTT content increases moral tolerance.	Accepted
H2	Youth perceive stronger influence on others than on themselves.	Accepted
H3	Males exhibit greater moral tolerance than females.	Accepted
H4	Perceived realism moderates exposure–tolerance relationship.	Accepted
H5	Higher media literacy reduces moral tolerance toward explicit content.	Accepted

3.4.1 Overall Interpretation

The empirical evidence demonstrates a clear pattern: youth are immersed in explicit OTT content, perceive themselves as relatively immune to its influence, yet display measurable shifts in tolerance and moral boundaries. The perceptual gap identified aligns with the Third-Person Effect, while the dose-response relationship between viewing frequency and tolerance confirms Media Effects and Cultivation assumptions.

Cultural modernization and digital autonomy are eroding conventional regulatory effectiveness. However, elevated media literacy can moderate adverse effects by reinforcing critical thinking and self-awareness.

3.5 Implications

3.5.1 Academic: Strengthens theoretical integration between traditional media-effect models and modern algorithmic media environments.

3.5.2 Regulatory: Highlights need for contextual self-regulation, stronger age-rating enforcement, and transparency in recommendation algorithms.

3.5.3 Educational: Advocates mandatory media-literacy curricula focusing on digital ethics and critical consumption.

3.5.4 Social: Suggests evolving moral pluralism among Indian youth, necessitating dialogue rather than censorship.

3.6 Conclusion

This analysis substantiates that exposure to explicit OTT content significantly shapes youth's moral tolerance, perception of realism, and understanding of media influence. While young audiences claim self-control, statistical and perceptual evidence reveal otherwise. The paradox of self-perceived immunity versus actual influence is central to contemporary media psychology.

Future studies should employ longitudinal and experimental designs to measure long-term cognitive and behavioral impacts, extend comparative cultural analyses, and examine algorithmic influence as a new media variable.

4. Comprehensive Study Summary

4.1 Summary of Objectives and Methods

The study aimed to:

- 4.1.1. Examine the extent and nature of exposure to explicit OTT content among undergraduate youth.
- 4.1.2. Assess the perceived influence of explicit content on individual and social behavior.
- 4.1.3. Analyze the relationship between exposure frequency and moral tolerance.
- 4.1.4. Investigate the role of media literacy and gender in moderating these effects.
- 4.1.5. Explore youth perceptions regarding content regulation and censorship.

Data were collected from 300 undergraduate students across Punjab and Chandigarh using a structured questionnaire. Both quantitative (descriptive, correlation, regression, t-tests, ANOVA) and qualitative (open-ended response) analyses were employed. The theoretical framework integrated Media Effects Theory, Third-Person Effect, and Cultivation Theory.

4.2 Major Findings

4.2.1 Exposure Patterns

- Over 89% of respondents watch OTT content for more than two hours daily.
- Netflix and Amazon Prime Video emerged as the most preferred platforms due to global accessibility and uncensored content.
- 72% regularly encounter sexual scenes, 81% profanity, and 77% drug/alcohol depictions.
- Exposure to explicit material is routine, not exceptional, indicating normalization.

4.2.2 Viewing Motivation and Platform Engagement

- Youth cite entertainment, realism, and peer discussion as primary motivations.
- Algorithmic recommendations and autoplay features encourage binge-watching, increasing exposure to explicit narratives.
- High exposure correlates with extended viewing hours and decreased content selectivity.

4.3.3 Perceived Influence

- Respondents believe explicit OTT content affects others more than themselves (Mean difference = 1.14).
- This demonstrates the Third-Person Effect, where self-perceived immunity coexists with acknowledgment of social influence.
- Despite denial of personal impact, increased exposure correlates with measurable changes in tolerance and acceptance levels.

4.4.4 Moral Tolerance and Desensitization

- Strong positive correlation ($r = 0.64$) between frequency of exposure and moral tolerance.
- Regression analysis confirms exposure and perceived realism as significant predictors of moral tolerance ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$).
- Frequent viewers display greater acceptance of profanity and sexual depictions, showing desensitization consistent with Cultivation Theory.

4.4.5 Gender Differences

- Males report higher exposure (Mean = 4.12) and moral tolerance (Mean = 3.91).
- Females show higher self-perceived susceptibility and greater support for content regulation.
- The difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), reflecting gendered socialization patterns in moral judgment.

4.4.6 Role of Media Literacy

- Media literacy inversely correlates with moral tolerance ($r = -0.24$, $p < 0.01$).
- Respondents with higher critical-awareness scores resist normalization of explicit content.
- This indicates that media literacy mitigates desensitization and enhances evaluative reasoning.

4.4.7 Qualitative Themes

- Youth perceive explicit content as “part of modern storytelling” rather than deviant material.
- Some express moral negotiation, admitting internal conflict between entertainment and ethics.
- Majority favor self-regulation by OTT platforms rather than governmental censorship, citing freedom of choice and creative liberty.

4.3 Thematic Consolidation of Findings

Thematic Area	Empirical Outcome	Theoretical Alignment
Exposure Intensity	High daily consumption (>2 hrs)	Media Effects Theory
Perceived Immunity	Self–other influence gap	Third-Person Effect
Desensitization	Repeated exposure reduces moral sensitivity	Cultivation Theory
Gendered Differences	Males more tolerant; females more critical	Socialization Perspective
Media Literacy Effect	Critical skills reduce normalization	Cognitive Mediation Model
Censorship Attitude	Preference for self-regulation	Liberal-Media Model

5. Extended Discussion

The study establishes that explicit OTT exposure is not merely entertainment but a socializing force reshaping youth morality. Exposure fosters liberal moral codes and increased acceptance of controversial themes.

The Third-Person Effect observed in perception gaps underlines the contradiction between self-perception and behavior — youth deny personal influence but internalize mediated norms.

Findings support the Cultivation Theory that prolonged exposure cultivates acceptance of new moral standards. OTT platforms thus serve as cultural translators, diffusing global liberal ideologies into local moral contexts. However, critical media literacy remains a protective buffer, demonstrating that awareness and education can curb automatic moral adaptation.

6. Conclusions & Strategic Recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

- Exposure is Ubiquitous and Persistent: OTT platforms are deeply integrated into youth lifestyles. Exposure to explicit material is routine and largely unregulated.

- **Perceived Immunity Is Illusory:** Despite denying personal influence, youth demonstrate behavioral tolerance shifts, validating the Third-Person Effect.
- **Desensitization Occurs Gradually:** Frequent exposure cultivates acceptance and normalizes explicit portrayals, confirming Cultivation Theory predictions.
- **Gender Shapes Moral Interpretation:** Male respondents are more permissive, while females maintain traditional moral concerns. Gender identity influences interpretive filters.
- **Media Literacy Moderates Impact:** Educated and critically aware respondents exhibit resistance to moral normalization. Literacy programs can neutralize exposure effects.
- **Preference for Self-Regulation:** Youth oppose strict censorship but support internal content labeling, parental locks, and age-appropriate ratings.
- **OTT as Cultural Agents:** Platforms act as vectors of globalization, diffusing liberal attitudes toward sexuality, profanity, and violence among Indian youth.

6.2 Recommendations

6.2.1 For Policymakers and Regulators

- **Develop a Uniform Content Classification System:** Similar to film certification boards, implement mandatory rating for OTT content (age, theme, explicitness).
- **Mandate Transparency in Algorithms:** Require disclosure of recommendation mechanisms that promote mature content.
- **Promote Self-Regulation Frameworks:** Encourage OTT platforms to adopt co-regulatory codes emphasizing ethical responsibility and user control.
- **Enhance Digital Safety Laws:** Extend the Information Technology Rules (2021) to explicitly include content exposure thresholds and accountability mechanisms.

6.2.2 For Educational Institutions

- **Integrate Media Literacy Modules:** Include critical media analysis and digital ethics in journalism, communication, and social sciences curricula.
- **Conduct Sensitization Workshops:** Train students to differentiate between representation and reality in media portrayals.
- **Encourage Research and Dialogue:** Create inter-disciplinary forums on media ethics, gender, and cultural consumption.

6.2.3 For Parents and Society

- **Facilitate Open Communication:** Encourage discussions about digital content instead of imposing restrictive bans.
- **Adopt Co-Viewing Practices:** Shared viewing and guided interpretation help contextualize media messages.

- Support Balanced Moral Education: Promote media literacy at home through informed engagement rather than censorship.

6.2.4 For OTT Platforms

- Enhance Parental Control Tools: Improve accessibility and awareness of existing safety settings.
- Provide Transparent Content Warnings: Include visual/audio disclaimers for explicit material.
- Encourage Responsible Storytelling: Incorporate ethical guidelines in production addressing sensitivity and audience maturity.

6.3 Study Implications

6.3.1 Theoretical Implications

- Extends Third-Person Effect Theory into the domain of OTT media, illustrating self–other influence asymmetry in digital contexts.
- Reinforces Cultivation Theory within nonlinear, binge-based media consumption models.
- Highlights Media Literacy as an effective moderating construct in new media studies.
- Suggests adaptation of classical media theories to streaming ecosystems and algorithm-driven exposure.

6.3.2 Practical Implications

- For Academia: Provides an analytical model integrating exposure, moral tolerance, and perceived influence suitable for replication across regions.
- For Industry: Offers insights into responsible content distribution balancing creative freedom and ethical responsibility.
- For Society: Illuminates changing moral paradigms among Indian youth, offering evidence for balanced discourse on digital morality.

7. Limitations & Future Directions

7.1 Limitations of the Study

- The study was restricted to undergraduate students within Punjab and Chandigarh; findings may not generalize nationally.
- Self-reported data could involve social desirability bias.
- Cross-sectional design limits causal inference; longitudinal follow-up could establish temporal influence.

- Qualitative responses were brief, offering limited narrative depth.

7.2 Suggestions for Future Research

- Longitudinal Studies: Track exposure and moral shifts over time to establish causal direction.
- Experimental Designs: Examine short-term behavioral or attitudinal changes post-exposure.
- Cross-Cultural Comparisons: Explore variations between Indian and global youth audiences.
- Algorithmic Exposure Studies: Analyze recommendation systems and their role in promoting explicit content.
- Neuropsychological Assessments: Investigate desensitization and emotional regulation through cognitive metrics.

8. Final Summary

The study concludes that exposure to explicit OTT content significantly influences the moral perceptions of youth, often subconsciously. While students perceive themselves as unaffected, their attitudes reflect gradual liberalization and desensitization. The findings affirm that OTT platforms are powerful cultural agents shaping modern Indian morality. However, the moderation observed through media literacy offers hope for cultivating conscious and critical audiences. The solution lies not in censorship but in education — fostering discernment over prohibition.

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