Beyond the 'good looks'

On the occasion of International Women's Day, this analysis examines if the emergence of streaming content has changed the portrayal of women characters vis-a-vis Bollywood

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Summary

- In this analysis of female protagonists over the last five years, the authors compare theatrical (films) and streaming (web-series) categories in Hindi language
- Using a personality framework, they assess if female characters in mainstream web-series embody different traits compared to those in mainstream theatrical films
- A clear difference emerges, wherein the focus in streaming is less on the looks and the glamorised presentation of the heroine, and more on intrinsic traits related to her competence

Over the last few years, conversations around the role of women in media have been prominent in the zeitgeist. On this website, we have looked at the issue from the perspective of equitable representation, as well as the shift in portrayal of women in Hindi Cinema over the decades. The rise in streaming content over the last 2-3 years provides an opportunity to broaden the scope of this discussion. The explosion of streaming content has put more female characters in front of us than ever before. However, has this expansion also led to a shift in how women are portrayed in Hindi streaming shows, vis-a-vis Hindi films, which have been guilty of stereotypical portrayal of women over the years?

Methodology

To understand the difference between the portrayal of female protagonists in Hindi streaming shows and their Hindi film (theatrical) counterparts, we used behaviour scientist Jennifer Aaker's Brand Personality Framework. This framework is a collection of personality traits under five dimensions. We have adapted this framework to analyse characters in theatrical, streaming and television content in India, with 27 relevant traits being retained from the original framework.

DIMENSIONS

SINCERITY	EXCITEMENT	COMPETENCE	SOPHISTICATION	RUGGEDNESS
Emotional	Cool	Sensible	Upper Class	Tough & Rugged
Honest	Funny	Confident	Good-looking	
Wholesome	Spirited	Hardworking	Glamorous	
Family-oriented	Independent	Inspirational	Cute	
Real	Young	Successful		
Down-to-earth	Contemporary	Intelligent		
Friendly	Innovative			
Caring	Daring			

TRAITS

To identify traits associated with a particular character, data is collected from audience of the show or the film in which the character features. For our analysis, we selected female protagonists from successful streaming shows over the last five years. "Successful" here is defined as a combination of estimated viewership and audience likeability, the latter being captured via our proprietary measure Ormax Power Rating (OPR). Only series with a minimum threshold viewership and an OPR of 50+ were considered. For theatrical, the top 50 highest-grossing Hindi films from the same time-period were considered. In both these content sets, personality traits of female protagonists with a sizeable role were analysed.

Findings

We looked at the profile of the two female protagonists set, averaged over all the characters in each set. Of the 27 traits, 10 traits featured in either the streaming set or the theatrical set, or both. These 10 traits have been classified into three categories in this chart.

Theatrical-specific traits	Common traits	Streaming-specific traits
☐ Good-looking	☐ Daring	☐ Intelligent
☐ Glamorous	☐ Confident	☐ Sensible
	☐ Young	☐ Contemporary
	☐ Cute	

Theatrical and streaming female protagonist profiles share four traits: Daring, Confident, Young & Cute. Two of these traits fall under the Excitement dimension, and one each under Competence and Sophistication. With the growth in 'action-oriented' professions like policewomen, warriors and sportswomen in Hindi cinema, traits like Daring and Confident have grown in their presence over the last decade.

But the more-interesting finding is about the unique traits in the two profiles. In theatrical, these traits are Good-looking and Glamorous, both extrinsic traits under the Sophistication dimension. Be it a rugged character like Zoya (Tiger Zinda Hai), the gold-digger Sweety (Sonu Ke Titu Ki Sweety) or the submissive Preeti (Kabir Singh), their looks, captured via these two traits (and the common trait Cute), is a consistent feature in the portrayal of the Hindi film heroine. While the characters themselves are very different, they serve a common purpose of providing an element of visual appeal and glamour to these (often dark and intense) films.

The unique traits of the streaming female protagonist profile are fundamentally different: Intelligent, Sensible and Contemporary. This combination, driven by the Competence dimension, makes these characters more proficient and purposeful, in their professional and personal lives. For example, Aarya, despite being played by the glamorous Sushmita Sen, relies more on her intelligence than on her extrinsic persona and looks. Similarly, Tara (Made In Heaven) is defined by her professional competence, and serves as a good representation of the modern upper class urban Indian woman in today's times. Vartika (Delhi Crime) perhaps embodies the contrast between streaming shows and theatrical films in the starkest manner. She's deglamorized, realistic and very efficient at her work.

This analysis shows that the emergence of streaming shows has enabled and fostered a different kind of female archetype in Hindi content, one that moves away from norms set by theatrical content over the years. This shift opens the space for greater diversity in the way women are portrayed in Hindi content. With streaming shows becoming more mainstream with time, there will only be more demand for this multiplicity, giving women on screen the spectrum of representation that they deserve.