

# OTT to be Responsibly Realistic: Social Impact of Abusive Language

Kajleen Kaur<sup>1</sup>, Harpeet Kaur<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Sri Guru Gobind Singh College of Commerce, University of Delhi

## Abstract

Over-the-Top (OTT), one of the most sought-after entertainment mediums, is extremely liberal in using substandard and abusive language. This has serious implications in the form of social impact on the audience, especially the younger generation. Massive exposure to strong language and misogynistic and vulgar expletives raises alarm bells about rising acceptance and tolerance among the general masses. The society has to bear the cost in terms of it being a demerit good with negative externalities.

The research paper extensively discusses these issues, exploring the need and possibility of framing rules and guidelines to regulate and control the increasing use of vulgar language. The paper also surveys over 300 viewers of varied age groups to understand their responsiveness to the abusive language on the OTT, its social impact, and the need for regulation.

**Keywords:** OTT, Abusive Language, Social Impact, Demerit Goods, Externalities

## 1. Introduction

The Over-the-Top (OTT) platform has changed India's entertainment landscape and has created a raised pedestal for itself among audiences. Due to changes in consumer viewing habits and technology improvements, OTT has grown in popularity in recent years. It is recognised as progressive, realistic, offering a huge variety, and caters to the needs of all age groups and genres (Kaur, 2024). The OTT is extremely flexible in terms of its access through multiple device support using the internet, such as smartphones, tablets, laptops, and smart TVs and is also convenient in terms of anytime and anywhere accessibility, unlike conventional cable networks.

Netflix was the first platform to launch its streaming service in 2007, followed by Amazon Prime Video in 2011, with the count increasing yearly. India offers the second-largest market for internet users worldwide, and OTT platforms gained major popularity during COVID-19. There is growing competition in the Indian market, and some of the popular platforms, including Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney Hotstar, Sony Liv, Zee, etc., are offering international, regional and local content.

India's population of 146 crore has eight crores stock market users, but fifty crores OTT subscribers (OGD, 2023). With the OTT gaining increasing popularity, there's an increasing concern about the proliferation of abusive language and content on these platforms, not suitable for the general masses in general and certain age groups in particular (Kaur, 2024).

The strong language on the OTT has raised several objections, both legally and in general. The Supreme Court, however, in its verdict (20<sup>th</sup> March 2024), does not consider the use of abusive language on OTT as a criminal offence, as it would cause infringement of free speech, violating artistic creativity. This leaves

us with an open debate about whether, under the guise of freedom of speech, we can use foul language that may be affecting the cultural values of people (Kaur, 2024).

## 2. Factors Behind Excessive Use of Abusive Language on OTT and Their Impact

OTT content makers justify the use of abusive language, matching viewers' expectations, as it is styled according to the audience's perception of the characters, themes, and overall tenor of the content (Kaur, 2024). According to them, it adds authenticity to certain narratives or characters.

2.1 The main factors for the use of abusive or sub-standard language on OTT are:

- **Realistic depiction of society**—Since the OTT content is a cinematic presentation of society itself, it largely chooses to be close to reality. The use of abusive language is commonly found, especially among lower and less educated strata, in crime events, intense emotional outbursts, or even general conversations among mature age groups. Among teenagers and the young generation, it has become a fashion statement (Kaur, 2024). The makers find it convincing to present what is prevalent.
- **Creative Freedom** – The OTT platform provides the opportunity for creators to be less restrictive in content presentation as compared to a TV series. It allows them to choose and present a wider range of themes, including those with strong language. The absence of stringent censorship rules allows creators to use abusive language for character-building and storytelling.
- **Targeted Audiences**—OTT content is normally classified to target different viewers. Adult viewers, in particular, are thought to be more receptive to mature themes. Some creators use strong language to attract viewers who appreciate foul, harsh, and unfiltered content, adding authenticity.
- **Cultural and Regional specifications** – Certain regional/cultural strata are more accustomed to the use of strong language. The makers, when choosing their portrayal, create related content to provide a closer depiction.
- **Character building** – A strong weaving of certain characters may demand the use of harsh or abusive language. Sometimes the story is improved by the use of abusive language. It adds to both the realism and popularity of the show. At times, a few characters gain more recognition and fame than the entire series or movies due to the dialogue. An easy way of popularising negative characters is adding the flavour of the cuss words which the audiences enjoy. It could be used to characterise someone as antagonistic, hostile, rebellious, or criminal to define their personality, background or feelings (Sahai, 2024).
- **Absence of Regulation** – Streaming of OTT is not regulated, unlike other conventional media like TV series and movies. The creators, therefore, take the leverage to cross the lines and present obscene and highly objectionable content both visually and in terms of language.

## 2.2 Impact of abusive language

The OTT has undoubtedly enhanced the creative and artistic performance of the writers and directors, and therefore, they can showcase the real world closely. The creators have the liberty to explore a wider range of emotions and narratives. It can be a tool to enhance character depth, express raw emotions, and make the dialogue more impactful. This is particularly useful in genres like crime, thriller, or drama, where harsh language reflects the intensity of situations or environments. Dhiman and Malik (2021) point out that strong language causes greater engagement and builds loyalty from viewers who appreciate such content. This can also create socially fragmented segments of audiences where some viewers who find it offensive, disrespectful, and morally challenging may avoid content from specific creators or platforms. Although the onus of common use of such language does not completely lie on the OTT, as it reflects

something already present, the streaming of such content without much censorship or regulation has certainly contributed to its prominence (Kaur, 2024). In general, the unregulated use of abusive language on OTT platforms severely impacts society. It can be categorised as a *demerit good with a high order of negative externality, together leading to Social Cost* (Kaur, 2024).

### 2.2.1 Abusive Language on OTT as a Demerit Good

As a demerit good, abusive language on OTT platforms refers to content with offensive, harmful, or inappropriate language that may negatively affect consumers, especially if not adequately regulated or restricted. Society may consider such content harmful due to its potential impact on individuals' behaviour, mental health, or societal norms, leading to overconsumption and underestimation of its negative effects (Kaur, 2024; Bhatia, 2021; Kumar, 2022).

This changes the fabric of the society, and in a country like India, which is known for its deep-rooted cultural values, it puts at stake its very identity. India is sometimes known as a soft power by default (Wagner, 2010), and its rich treasure of Upanishads, Vedas, widespread acceptance of Buddhism across the globe, the popularity of yoga and Ayurveda, and belief in ancient universities draw scholars and learners to India.

The unhesitant and widespread acceptance of low-quality language, dominantly spread via OTT, is putting at risk our long-inherited values, culture and societal outlook. This is a disadvantage for the nation, both in terms of uprooting the indigenous ethos and also losing its global identity.

### 2.2.2 Negative Externalities

Negative externalities occur when the consumption of a good (in this case, abusive language in OTT content) imposes costs on third parties who are not directly involved in the consumption. These costs may affect individuals, communities, or society at large.

#### • Deterioration of Communication Skills

Younger age viewers or immersive audiences get easily influenced by the abusive language, adopting it in their routine daily discourse. When celebrities onscreen use such language, the viewers get influenced and consciously or unconsciously emulate their behaviour, creating a *demonstration effect*.

Use of foul language in common parlance can be detrimental both in personal and professional arenas. It could escalate verbal conflicts in families, friendships, and workplaces, hampering emotional well-being. It erodes social boundaries and norms, encouraging more aggressive and hostile forms of communication. The society eventually experiences a moral decay, undermining the educational and professional values. The younger generation, which gets easily influenced by media, considers the use of expletives in daily conversations as a fashion statement and sometimes even necessary for social connections. Eventually, it normalises the use of indecent language, desensitising the viewers and increasing their tolerance to verbal abuse in society, making it more acceptable and normal. Gradually, it hampers decent and effective articulation of thoughts, which is detrimental to social interactions.

In workplaces, where soft skills are considered essential, this kind of rough communication hampers a cordial and conducive work culture and unnecessarily creates an unpleasant, offensive and hostile work environment. This can lead to lower employee morale and productivity, especially among women workforce. In cases of extreme verbal harassment or hate speech, the authorities would need to enforce a stringent code of conduct and counselling sessions aimed at reducing aggressive behaviour (Rajput, 2024).

#### • Inappropriate language as a threat to the Indian Knowledge System

Education in India is in a transition process with the introduction of the National Education Policy and the Indian Knowledge System. It thrives on providing a high-quality education system rooted in the Indian

ethos, contributing to transforming India into a value-based superpower. OTT platforms offer global access to a wide range of content, but without adequate regulation or cultural sensitivity, their influence may undermine traditional values, educational goals, and societal norms (Kaur, 2024).

The extensive use of offensive or abusive language in OTT content can have a detrimental effect on language skills. At tender and vulnerable ages, students acquire discourteous or informal language patterns, oblivious of the distinction between appropriate and inappropriate language. The young learners' ability to think creatively, communicate wisely and express themselves with conviction all suffer due dominant exposure of offensive language on OTT. This is inconsistent with professional and academic communication norms.

The core principles of the Indian education system focus on holistic, values-based learning with discipline and respect. This encompasses, besides academics, the wholesome development of personality with individuals who are morally and culturally rooted, yet confident and educated to bring a change in society and economy. The harsh and rough language used on the OTT platforms could shift focus away from productive content, leading to a deterioration of educational and intellectual standards. It can tarnish cultural sensibilities rooted in Indian traditions, thereby weakening students' connection to their heritage. So, while at one place, when we are trying to imbibe and revive our rich heritage, at the same time, we are defending, if not promoting, the use of indecent language. We have a zero-tolerance policy against abuse in educational institutions, but a child tends to learn from the overall environment of which OTT is presently an unavoidable part.

- **OTT Promotes Gender Stereotypes**

Another aspect of the negative externality related to foul language in OTT content is that it incorporates *gender-specific derogatory slurs*, predominantly objectifying women (Kaur, 2024), which deteriorates their self-respect and is socially offensive. In a country that is already gender biased towards males, such offensive or derogatory language towards women can desensitise viewers to the harmful impacts of such language on women's dignity and rights, reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes. It glorifies misogynistic attitudes by using offensive language casually, and can hinder progress towards creating respectful, equal spaces in society. It can also create mental stress, a decline in self-esteem and avoid creating a safe and respectful environment for women.

India's culture is known for worshipping goddesses and placing women in a revered position in all their roles. Undeniably, women are behind building the strong-rooted edifice of values and ethics; it is the society's responsibility to uphold their dignity.

***Thus, abusive language in OTT content, while potentially popular, can have serious repercussions and acts as a demerit good with notable negative externalities.***

### **3. Need for Regulation/Censorship**

The OTT platforms offer unrestricted access to content from all genres, with almost uncensored telecast as opposed to television or cinema. A large strata of society is generally uncomfortable with such unpleasing content, available without any regulation. It is offensive, inappropriate, and can contribute to an array of social harms, from desensitisation and normalisation of verbal abuse to its negative effects on viewers of different ages, cultures and societies (Sahai, 2024; Tripathi, 2020).

Simply providing a statutory warning of the 'content not suitable for a certain age does not complete the makers' responsibility (Kaur, 2024). With the availability of the internet and its easy access via gadgets in

every home, it is practically impossible to prevent kids from watching such content every time. With the nuclear family setups and working parents culture gaining strength, it becomes even more difficult. Many countries have vaguely defined guidelines and laws pertaining to the content (Baccarne, 2014). The Indian government enacted new regulations in 2021 requiring OTT platforms to self-regulate their content and give viewers a way to file complaints. Additionally, the regulations mandate that platforms show content warnings and categorise content according to age suitability. In the USA, the OTT is governed by the same laws as traditional broadcasters. The Broadcasting Notification in Singapore mandates that OTT platforms adhere to content standards and classification regulations.

There is a clear need for strengthening of regulatory measures, as OTT has become the future of the entertainment industry globally. The potential measures include effective disclaimers and language guidelines that should reflect cultural, ethical, and social norms, for the viewers to choose from and avoid exposure to inappropriate content (Sahai, 2024). The viewers should be allowed to report offensive content, and regulators such as the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting should be allowed to take action or penalise the creators in extreme cases. The measures thus need to be a combination of stricter content classification, self-regulation, and governmental interference to ensure decency, respect, and cultural sensitivity in media consumption.

Most importantly, there is an ardent need for greater public awareness about the impact of offensive language in the media. Viewers, especially parents, should be educated about how to monitor the content their families are exposed to. Schools must regularly counsel the students to watch only age-related, knowledgeable, and clean entertainment content and also spread greater awareness of the impact of language and content on social behaviour.

While the OTT platforms are growing in influence and are becoming inevitable, ensuring appropriate content for all viewers, without hampering creative freedom, is a delicate but essential balance to be achieved. Governments and regulatory agencies will have to keep reviewing and updating the laws governing these services as their popularity grows.

#### 4. Survey to Assess the Impact of Abusive Language

Based on the discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of strong language on OTT platforms, a survey has been conducted in this paper to understand the opinion, psychology, responsiveness, and adaptation of the people and thereby their social impact. In the survey, data have been collected from a sample of 306 people, of different age groups comprising 13-15, 16-18 and 18 and above, including 58 per cent males, 42 per cent females and none from other genders. The majority of the respondents (98 per cent) watch content streamed on OTT. The demographics of the survey are clearly mentioned in Table 1, and the survey results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 1: Demographics of the Survey**

<b>Total No. of Respondents</b>		306
<b>Age Distribution</b>		
13-15 years	16-18 years	18 years and above
68	86	152
<b>Gender Distribution</b>		

Males	Females	Others
177	129	0
Total No. of OTT Viewership	300/306	

Source: Authors' own formulation

**Table 2: Survey to understand the psychology of people towards abusive language on OTT**

S.No.	Questions	Agree (Per cent)	Disagree (Per cent)	NA/Neutral /Indifferent (Per cent)
1.	Do you find abusive content on OTT to be realistic?	53.3	10.1	36.6
2.	Have you watched any content with a statutory warning of not recommended for your age?	43.8	6.2	50
3.	Do you find abusive language particularly derogatory to the female gender?	86	12	2
4.	Do you condemn the use of misogynistic language?	46.4	38.6	38.6
5.	Do you think the use of abusive language has become common after OTT?	75.8	18.2	6.1
6.	Are you comfortable watching content using abusive language with your family members, including parents and siblings?	18	67	15
7.	Do you consider the use of abusive language as a fashion statement after being promoted on OTT platforms?	78	14	8
8.	Does the use of abusive language make you more confident?	56.8	30.7	12.5
9.	Do you think OTT content creators should be more sensitive to social impact?	84	14	2
10.	Do you think there should be censorship regulations for the content on OTT?	59.3	38.7	2

Source: Authors' own formulation

Analysis of the sample survey shows that, across all age groups, OTT (98 per cent of the sample) is the future of the entertainment industry. With the majority of the sample agreeing that content being realistic and the statutory warning are neither binding nor effective in controlling viewership by age, it plays a dominant role in influencing lifestyles, demeanour, and social behaviour and interactions.

With the majority of the sample (86 per cent) agreeing that the language on all OTT platforms is misogynistic, shockingly, only 46 per cent of the sample condemns the use of such language towards

women, and 78 per cent considers the expletives to be fashionable, with around half respondents confessing to gaining a sense of empowerment and confidence with the use of such language. At the same time, 67 per cent of the sample is hesitant to watch such content with family members, including parents and siblings, 84 per cent agree that the makers should be sensitive to the social impact of the use of sub-standard language, and more than half of the sample (60 per cent) agrees to censorship regulation for OTT platforms. This gives hope that people are realising the negative impact of such language on society and the loss of cultural values.

## 5. Conclusion

OTT platforms are poised to become the dominant force in the entertainment ecosystem globally. Its trajectory of demand is highly promising, driven by key drivers like variety, ease of access, realistic and relatable, economical and catering to all ages and genres. Given its growing popularity and presence, it is an unavoidable part of entertainment consumption. The profane language used, however, raises social concerns, and therefore it is important for the creators to morally ponder beyond popularity, monetary benefits, and stream not just REALISTIC but RESPONSIBLE content (Kaur, 2024). A good and progressive social environment is one where individuals feel respected, secure, and valued.

## References

1. Baccarne, B., Tom, E. and Dimitri, S. (2013) "The television struggle: an assessment of over-the-top television evolutions in a cable dominant market", *Communications & Strategies*, 92(4), pp. 43–61. Available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2473955>.
2. Bhatia, S. (2021), "Impact of Abusive Language on Indian OTT Audiences: A Behavioural Analysis", *Psychology of Media and Society*, 19(2), 45-58.
3. Dhiman, B., Pawan, M. (2021), "Psychosocial Impact of Web Series and Streaming Content: A Study on Indian Youth", *Global Media Journal*, 19(46), 1-7.
4. Kaur, K. "How justified is abusive language on OTT". *The Pioneer (Opinion)*, 19 April 2024. <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2024/columnists/how-justified-is-abusive-language-on-ott-.html>
5. Kumar, N. (2022), "Media Language and Public Perception: The Case of OTT Content in India", *Communication Research Journal*, 26(2), 41-55.
6. Open Government Data (OGD) (2023): *Statistical Data on Stock Market Participation and OTT Subscribers in India*, Government of India, available at <https://data.gov.in>
7. Rajput, R. (2024), "Hate Speech and Freedom of Expression: A Fine Line in Digital Media Regulation" *Law and Society Review*, 22(4), 113-126.
8. Sahai, V. (2024) "The Prevalence and Impact of Abusive Language in Indian OTT Platforms: A Critical Examination," *International Journal of Science, Engineering and Technology*, 12(6).
9. Tripathi, D. (2020), "OTT Platforms: Impact on Indian Society and the Need for Regulatory Frameworks" *Indian Journal of Media Studies*, 18(3), 22-35. 9.