



Research Article

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Titillation and Transgression: The (Un)Ethical Quagmire of Indian Digital News Media

Shiv Shankar Das¹, Sruthi Rajan², Mehul Agarwal^{2*}

¹Associate Professor, Birla School of Communication, Birla Global University, Bhubaneswar

²Assistant Professor, Birla School of Communication, Birla Global University, Bhubaneswar

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ABSTRACT

The research carefully examines how Indian digital news media construct images of female celebrities and the effect this has on how young people see them. A close reading of headlines from four widely used digital sites was combined with a 'think-aloud' method, asking young adults to express what they were thinking as they read news articles to capture their immediate reactions. The results show that news is often made to be shocking, and women are portrayed in a very sexist manner. Using feminist theory, the study argues that journalists writing about entertainment should be more considerate and responsible, and it reveals the hidden power dynamics at work the way media operates.

INTRODUCTION

It is apparent that contemporary media culture is characterized by constant scrutiny of celebrities, particularly female celebrities and their bodies. Media cultures in which the visual representation of female figures became highly popular have led to an objectification of the feminine body and an elevation of it to an object of perusal (Berger, 1972). Indian digital news media (IDNM) are no exception, employing the use of shocking images and headlines, many of which have been sourced directly from female celebrities' Instagram accounts (Bazaco et al., 2019). Such practices constitute 'news cannibalism', with content reused without proper attribution. Repurposing has not become a common practice only in recent times; however, the current era allows for immediate reuse, rendering the process easier (Phillips, 2010).

Within news articles, titillating descriptions take precedence over women's ability to make decisions and determine their lives, thereby reinforcing the perception

of their multifaceted personalities as one-dimensional. In the digital age, such representations are amplified by algorithms, making them even more compelling. However, the issue raises critical ethical questions regarding the media's role in forming public perceptions of gender, identity, and power relations.

Although not prohibited by the 1986 Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act in India, the portrayal of female figures in such media channels thrives because the Internet is an ideal platform for creating echo chambers. Multiple news stories featuring sensationalist text and these images are produced to cater to individuals from all social classes without requiring users to undergo any age verification process. Societal consequences include the deterioration of women's reputation as capable workers, increasing the incidence of sexism in society, and promoting unhealthy beauty ideals among viewers (Ward, 2016). Young adults are the primary audience for such digital content and should therefore be considered when

*Corresponding Author: Mehul Agarwal

Address: Associate Professor, Birla School of Communication, Birla Global University, Bhubaneswar

Email ✉: agarwalmehul16@gmail.com

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investigating perceptions. The disregard for journalistic ethics warrants an examination of how these practices impact societal perceptions and the agency of women.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of IDNM's representations of famous women on young people's perceptions and how these representations contribute to gendered power relations. The research uses thematic analysis and think-aloud techniques to explore the impact of media headlines and responses from readers. Feminist and philosophical perspectives will be used in the study to critique media ethics.

The objectives are

- to identify recurring themes in IDNM's representations of female celebrities
- to explore young adults' affective and perceptual responses to these portrayals, and
- to evaluate the ethical and societal consequences of such media practices, proposing pathways for more responsible representations.

The research questions are:

- What are the recurring themes in IDNM's representations of female celebrities?
- How do young adults perceive and emotionally respond to their portrayals of female celebrities?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Gaze And Objectification

"...Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at..." (Berger, 1972, p. 47). John Berger, in his classic work *Ways of Seeing*, expresses this radical criticism of the visual culture, which is based on the primitive constructions of evolution. Dimulescu (2015), too, has talked about how, in the early 19th century, women's physical attributes began to be documented and looked upon with fascination. This claim is especially applicable in the digital era, when the identities and bodies of women are even more subject to scrutiny due to the spread of digital media platforms. Such outlets reinforce unrealistic beauty standards and amplify scrutiny of female appearance (Elias and Gill, 2018; Henriques and Patnaik, 2021; Yamout et al., 2019). Today, though, it is not just about 'looking'; it is also about digital media turning these appearances into commodities for the public to buy. It is not the women playing to the gallery that is being questioned; rather, it is the media's sensationalization of the appearances for their gain, frequently using sensational headlines.

The Gaze, Affect, And Media Assemblages

The gaze extends beyond Mulvey's (1988) male-centric framework to Lacan's (1978) broader psychoanalytic theory, positioning it as a structuring force that reshapes subjectivity within the symbolic order. Whereas Mulvey focuses on gendered spectatorship, where women are the

objects of male gratification, the gaze of Lacan focuses on the consciousness of the viewer that he or she is being gazed at, which brings about self-consciousness and internal reflection (McGowan, 2008). Within the framework of the IDNM, Mulvey describes how headlines appeal to the male gaze by fetishizing the female body, and the gaze shows how the celebrity and the audience internalize this scrutiny, modifying their behaviors to meet the demands of the media. As an example, a headline such as 'Sexy! Nia Sharma Flaunts Ample Cleavage In A White Dress; Hot Photos Go Viral, See Here' may evoke male desire (Mulvey, 1988) while compelling the celebrity to maintain a sexualized persona to remain relevant (Lacan, 1978). This objectification is heightened by this dual gaze dynamic because media visibility consumes and disciplines women.

This is further clarified by Ahmed's (2004) 'affective economies' where the representations of IDNM provoke emotions that stick onto female bodies, thus strengthening gendered meanings. An article about a celebrity's wardrobe malfunction can either titillate or disgust, making her professional accomplishments secondary and casting her in the role of an emotional object. This is complemented by the assemblage framework of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), which considers such presentations as nodes in a digital ecology of bodies, algorithms, and user interactions. These assemblages go hand in hand to produce affect and power as algorithms generate provocative content to the fullest extent, forming a cultural discourse of femininity and desirability (Massumi, 2002). An example of this is a close-up picture of the body of a celebrity, which operates in ways that are interacting with algorithmic curation to prioritize the visibility and thus creating a loop of objectification that goes beyond the individual pictures.

Disciplinary Power And Digital Surveillance

Foucauldian disciplinary power enables a critical view of how IDNM has been used to control female bodies by disciplining them through surveillance and normalization (Foucault, 1975). Reification is also illustrated in the way in which personal Instagram feeds of female celebrities are transformed into sensual viral pictures. Originally expressions of individual identity or agency, these posts are deprived of human context and transformed into commodified objects to be consumed (Feenberg, 2015).

The digital platforms, therefore, serve as a contemporary panopticon, making women hyper-visible with sensational headlines that highlight specific parts of the body or eye-catching phrases, which are usually not relevant to the content of the article (Paudel, 2023). Such exposure tames the celebrities and viewers to the extent that the former are encouraged to uphold sexualized images, and the latter to adopt unrealistic standards of beauty (Bartky, 1990). As an example, news stories that focus on the cleavage of a celebrity with the news about her philanthropy are more about the looks than the



content, thereby confirming stereotypes associated with the worth of women. Algorithms amplify this dynamic by focusing on compelling content and putting authority in the daily media habits which make gendered visibility a matter of course and marginalize women intellectual work (Foucault, 1975).

Ethical Implications And Societal Repercussions

Ethical breaches across different news beats have been a prevalent concern for research on media ethics (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2021). The fact that IDNM places sensationalism at the center of its core values at the expense of ethical reporting casts serious doubts on the role it plays in our society. Ward (2019) links frequent exposure to sexualized content with reduced esteem for women's competence, increased sexism, and tolerance for sexual violence. According to objectification theory (Fox et al., 2015), these representations promote self-objectification, which encourages women to perceive themselves as objects to be consumed, which, in turn, can give rise to such negative attitudes as supporting rape myths. Such practices contribute to a culture that legitimizes gender-based marginalization, restricting the ambitions of women and upholding patriarchal conventions. The sexualized news headlines are amplified algorithmically, forming a feedback loop that puts more emphasis on engagement instead of dignity and cements power disparities (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). This necessitates a remodeled media environment in which ethical representations are given precedence, in which cultural discourses that value women's agency and multidimensionality are created.

Research Gap

Although feminist scholarship has widely criticized media representations of women, little attention has been paid in academic literature to how IDNM specifically contributes to continuing the culture of objectification by using sensationalized headlines and thumbnails, especially in the Indian context. Given India's unique digital media ecosystem, the lack of similar studies on digital gender-media interactions in other non-Western environments represents an important gap. Furthermore, real-time audience response to such news has not yet been captured, particularly in terms of correlating affective responses with ethical and societal consequences. This paper fills this gap by examining how women celebrities are represented in IDNM and how they influence young adults by applying both feminist and philosophical frameworks to question power, affect, and media assemblages and promoting ethical journalism to counter objectification.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employs a qualitative research design,

combining thematic analysis of news articles with think-aloud expressions to examine how IDNM platforms portray female celebrities and shape young adults' perceptions. The thematic analysis of news articles identifies recurring patterns in headlines, while think-aloud expressions capture real-time affective and perceptual responses, offering insights into the lived experience of media consumption (Clarke and Braun, 2017; Van Someren et al., 1994). This dual method aligns with feminist and philosophical frameworks, enabling a nuanced exploration of power, affect, and ethical implications.

This study aims to shed light on how specific media practices affect public views and encourage contemplation of the ethical implications, for which the following ethical paradigms are considered:

Feminist care ethics, or the Ethics of Care, emphasizes empathy, relationality, and care towards marginalized groups, particularly women, in ethical decision-making and social relations. A care ethicist opposes the hierarchical application of general laws. Caring "moves to concretization where (the agent's) feelings can be modified by the introduction of facts, the feelings of others, and personal histories" (Koehn, 2012, p. 30). This ensures the focus is on how sensationalist media may purposefully or inadvertently reinforce specific gendered presumptions rather than criticizing it.

Virtue ethics focuses on the development of virtuous character traits and the cultivation of moral virtues, guiding ethical actions based on principles of integrity and respect for dignity. It concentrates on the characteristics, circumstances, and deeds of moral actors (Gorichanaz, 2023). In this study, virtue ethics provides a foundation for examining whether digital news outlets preserve the dignity of female performers or diminish their intrinsic value by seeing them as nothing more than objects of aesthetic appreciation.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection involved two complementary methods, justified for their alignment with qualitative feminist research:

Content Collection

Four popular platforms that had high viewership and significant influence on the young Indian population were chosen for a thematic analysis of specific news stories. Through this approach, it is possible to study

Table 1: Sampled IDNM platforms considered in the study

Two national media platforms	Two regional media platforms
<i>news18.com</i> (TV18 Broadcast Limited)	<i>mangaloretoday.com</i> (Mangalore Today Group)
<i>ndtv.com</i> (New Delhi Television Limited)	<i>odishatv.in</i> (Odisha Television Network)

Table 2: Serial-wise list of sampled news articles sourced from the IDNM platforms

S. N.	IDNM Platform	News Article (Link)
1	News 18 (news18.com), accessed on May 08, 2024	https://www.news18.com/movies/sexy-pooja-hegde-flaunts-her-curves-in-a-golden-dress-hot-photos-go-viral-see-here-8819663.html
2		https://www.news18.com/movies/sexy-disha-patani-flaunts-her-curves-in-a-beige-bodysuit-hot-photo-goes-viral-see-here-8818440.html
3		https://www.news18.com/movies/sexy-nia-sharma-flaunts-ample-cleavage-in-a-white-dress-hot-photos-go-viral-see-here-8803610.html
4		https://www.news18.com/movies/sexy-aisha-sharma-flaunts-ample-cleavage-in-a-black-tank-top-hot-photos-goes-viral-see-here-8780645.html
5		https://www.news18.com/movies/sexy-poonam-pandey-flaunts-ample-cleavage-in-an-off-shoulder-top-hot-photos-go-viral-8832912.html
6	NDTV (ndtv.com), accessed on May 08, 2024	https://www.ndtv.com/lifestyle/thats-not-a-neon-light-beaming-at-you-its-just-eshha-gupta-going-boss-mode-in-a-green-pantsuit-5467755
7		https://www.ndtv.com/lifestyle/tropical-the-island-breeze-and-suhana-khans-summer-vibe-in-this-printed-swimsuit-5374178
8		https://www.ndtv.com/lifestyle/it-isnt-hot-cocoa-season-but-it-sure-could-be-if-its-sonam-bajwa-in-this-cutout-dress-5295238
9		https://www.ndtv.com/lifestyle/everything-alia-bhatt-touches-turns-to-this-pleated-strapless-gold-top-from-a-throwback-post-of-her-birthday-5290861
10		https://www.ndtv.com/lifestyle/kylie-jenner-is-heating-things-up-in-a-sultry-black-boudoir-inspired-look-to-shoot-for-sam-edelmans-20th-anniversary-latest-campaign-5229950
11	Mangalore Today (mangaloretoday.com), accessed on May 09, 2024	https://www.mangaloretoday.com/titbits/Tamannaah-Bhatia-flaunts-curves-in-a-bold-black-corset-hot-photos-go-viral.html
12		https://www.mangaloretoday.com/titbits/Avneet-Kaur-flaunts-her-curves-in-a-backless-bodycon-dress-hot-photos-go-viral.html
13		https://www.mangaloretoday.com/titbits/Avneet-Kaur-sets-Internet-scorching-in-a-strapless-dress-flaunts-hot-curves-in-viral-pics.html
14		https://www.mangaloretoday.com/titbits/Samantha-Ruth-Prabhu-goes-topless-under-blazer-for-racy-photo-shoot-Check-out-her-hot-photos.html
15		https://www.mangaloretoday.com/titbits/Disha-Patani-raises-the-heat-in-very-racy-skintight-dress-See-pics.html
16	Odisha Television Network (odishatv.in), accessed on May 09, 2024	https://odishatv.in/news/entertainment/sharma-sisters-neha-and-aisha-flaunt-well-toned-curves-in-cut-out-outfits-233236
17		https://odishatv.in/news/entertainment/shehnaaz-gill-goes-topless-sets-internet-ablaze-in-black-leather-jacket-check-out-her-bold-avatar-233194
18		https://odishatv.in/news/entertainment/rashmika-mandanna-s-sensuous-expressions-in-latest-photos-go-viral-233080
19		https://odishatv.in/news/entertainment/disha-patani-dials-up-summer-with-sensuous-photoshoot-230411
20		https://odishatv.in/news/entertainment/tamannaah-bhatia-raashii-khanna-s-leaked-pictures-are-too-hot-to-handle-230149

the main artifact used by IDNM while representing the topic under study. A sample of news stories was chosen based on the need to analyze a variety of sensationalist presentations of women. The sampling period was conducted between January and April 2024. Five news stories were sampled from each platform to ensure

representation of sensationalist headlines (“sexy,” “curves,” “cleavage”) relating to the depiction of female celebrities’ physical appearance. Since qualitative research aims for depth of analysis, this number of samples would help understand the most common practices of IDNM (Lim, 2025; Patton, 2014) (Tables 1 & 2).

Table 3: Variables used for Analysis of News Articles

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Explanation</i>	<i>Variables</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
Empathy	understanding celebrities as multifaceted beings (Held, 2005)	Objectification	treating women as mere spectacles (Nussbaum, 1995)
Dignity	representations affirming inherent worth (Nussbaum, 2001)	Complexity	acknowledging multidimensional identities (Bartky, 1990)

Think-Aloud Expressions

A total of 36 subjects within the age range of 18 to 24 years took part in the think aloud process (20 females, 16 males). The study population of active users of digital media were definitely affected by the IDNM's representations, and the gender division allowed for more introspective thoughts. For the diversity of viewpoints, a convenient sample was employed to select young people who consumed digital media (more than three hours per day). This is consistent with the exploratory, interpretative research approach used. Qualitative validity was preferred to representativeness through numbers. At a certain stage, participants started repeating affective and interpretive responses, suggesting audience saturation. Participants viewed the news articles in a controlled environment

and provided instant reactions. The transcriptions from anonymous discussions gave insights into the media framing affective responses and interpretations of the subjects. This data collection technique is founded in cognitive psychology theory (Eccles & Arsal, 2017; Ericsson & Simon, 1998), capturing unbiased emotional and cognitive responses from which the process of evaluating IDNM representations can be learned.

Data Analysis Methods

For headlines, coding occurred linguistically and visually, whereas think-alouds were examined for affective and perceptual responses. As for Think-aloud expressions, analysis was based on thematic analysis, as described by Clarke & Braun (2017) in terms of six steps: (1) becoming familiar with data; (2) creating initial codes; (3) looking for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) reporting on themes. Codes are defined as deductive, based on theory and variables such as empathy, dignity, objectification, and complexity, as well as inductive, found in data. Such analysis methods are justified due to their consistency with qualitative research within feminist approaches, allowing to examine systematically effects of IDNM on gender perception and link results to moral and societal implications (Table 3).

Ethical Considerations

Participation involved obtaining informed consent, explaining clearly the purpose of the study, participants' right to withdrawal, and guaranteeing anonymity and data confidentiality. All data were anonymized, stored properly, and accessed by authorized persons only. Taking into consideration the fact that IDNM often includes potentially distressing content (e.g., sexualized images), care is taken of participants' wellbeing and debriefing sessions are organized in case of experiencing any discomfort (Noushad et al., 2024). In addition, news items included do not feature extremely disturbing materials in accordance with ethics guidelines related to media analysis. Respect for participants' dignity and wellbeing is ensured, in line with feminist approach that emphasizes these principles (Held, 2005). Also, the researchers' positionality as critical feminist scholars informs the work, and reflexivity and open techniques are used to overcome potential bias.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of News Articles

Table 4: Results drawn from the sampled news articles from the IDNM platforms

<i>S. N.</i>	<i>Empathy</i>	<i>Objectification</i>	<i>Dignity</i>	<i>Complexity</i>
1	No	No	No	Yes
2	No	No	No	Yes
3	No	No	No	Yes
4	No	No	No	Yes
5	No	No	No	Yes
6	No	Yes	No	Yes
7	No	Yes	Yes	No
8	No	Yes	No	Yes
9	No	No	Yes	No
10	No	No	No	Yes
11	No	No	No	Yes
12	No	No	No	Yes
13	No	No	No	Yes
14	No	No	No	Yes
15	No	No	No	Yes
16	No	No	Yes	No
17	No	No	No	Yes
18	No	No	No	Yes
19	No	No	No	Yes
20	No	No	No	Yes

Table 5: Codes used for Analysis of Think-Aloud Expressions

<i>Codes</i>	<i>Explanation</i>	<i>Codes</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
Pervasive Sexualization & Objectification	frequent framing of women through a sexualised and reductive lens (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997)	Normalization of Sensationalism	acceptance of exaggerated and scandal-driven portrayals as routine (Debord, 1967)
Affective Responses Shaping Gendered Perceptions	emotional reactions influencing stereotypes and gendered judgements (Ahmed, 2004)	Ethical Critiques and Calls for Dignity	scholarly and activist appeals for respectful representation (Nussbaum, 2001)
Tension Between Agency & Exploitation	conflict between self-expression and commodification of bodies (Gill, 2007)	Gendered Differences in Perception	divergent audience readings shaped by gendered socialisation (van Zoonen, 1994)

The analysis reveals a complete disregard for the opinions and experiences of the famous female celebrities in each of the twenty news articles. The headline of each article sensationalizes the female body by portraying the women as an object of sexual attraction rather than analyzing the complexities of their characters. The NDTV news article titled “Kylie Jenner Is Heating Things Up In A Sultry Black Boudoir-Inspired Look For Sam Edelman Campaign” talks about Kylie Jenner solely from the perspective of her “seductive style” rather than engaging with her opinion regarding this issue. Likewise, the Odisha TV news article titled “Shehnaaz Gill goes topless, sets internet ablaze in black leather jacket; check out her bold avatar” concentrates on her “bold” image without considering her viewpoint on this matter. Highlighting the significance of understanding the lived experiences of marginalized communities such as women, the feminist care ethics framework considers this absence of empathy as an ethical offense.

With a preference for sensationalism over empathy, these IDNM platforms maintain the normative and hierarchical systems responsible for dictating restrictive notions of beauty and attractiveness. Here, it is appropriate to consider Foucault’s (1975) concept of bodies being forced into conforming systems because the news reports do not respect the uniqueness and individuality of the actors but promote images of youth, beauty, luxuriousness, and wealth (Patnaik, 2023). Hence, the news articles focus more on the creation of sexual appeal than the honest depiction of women in pictures. The absence of empathy with regard to understanding the experiences of the female performers means that the focus lies with producing ‘sexual appeal’ (Rahman, 2020), highlighting the need for more morally complex and nuanced depictions in the media. However, a greater degree of moral complexity should be promoted within mass media depictions. In similar studies on media representation (Dimulescu, 2015; Patnaik, 2023; Rahman, 2020; Rao, 2014), it is shown that these representations tend to marginalize the position of women within media narratives by promoting stereotypical views about them. Although such insensitivity towards the experiences of people is a matter of concern, the examination of

the complexity of female performers suggests that this problem relates to a larger issue about perceptions of female identity and beauty (Table 4).

The news articles did not portray women as complex beings, reducing them to just one aspect of their existence. Of all twenty articles, only three (and all were on NDTV) have tried to portray the complexity of these actresses, whereas the rest have chosen not to explore the complexity of being a woman through their portrayal. ‘Sexy! Nia Sharma Flaunts Ample Cleavage In A White Dress; Hot Photos Go Viral, See Here’ from News 18 is one such article where the actress’ complexity is completely disregarded in favor of portraying her simply as her physical attributes. The actress’ complexity has been further downplayed by the way the article is titled, which brings into question the actress’ choice of dress, feeding into the prejudices against her. In contrast to acknowledging actor Rashmika Mandanna as a complex, multifaceted human with agency and depth, the Odisha TV story headed ‘Rashmika Mandanna’s sensuous expressions in latest photos go viral’ sensationalizes her emotions, rendering the actor’s expressions to a dimension of sensuality.

Digital news sources, such as women’s health magazines, often focus on the bodily features of women alone, presenting them as being a static picture (Patnaik, 2023). Not only do such unethical practices ignore the inclusivity of the performers and treat them as human beings (Rao, 2014), but they also perpetuate stereotyping and dehumanization (Das, 2020). Consequently, portraying such people as one-dimensional caricatures intended to entertain viewers, these IDNM practices are against morals. Such news stories usually overlook the complexity of human beings by describing these females in a way that ignores their diversity and life experiences (Sahoo, 2015). The findings clearly indicate that it is crucial to portray female complexity in a kinder and more compassionate way through media representation. Also, the value of these performers is associated with physical traits only, thus ignoring their complexity and failing to respect their inherent human dignity.

There is an alarming development regarding how the dignity of the female actors is preserved. Again, only three

of the twenty stories meaningfully represent these women as individuals, regardless of their physical attributes. Two out of these three stories appear in NDTV, and the other one is in Odisha TV. The majority of the news stories focus on the physical appeal of the female actors without considering their dignity as individuals. This method of reporting does not take into account the true nature of these ladies beyond their physical attributes, confining them within the narrow confines of beauty. The news story in News 18 titled “Sexy! Disha Patani Flaunts Her Curves In A Beige Bodysuit, Hot Photo Goes Viral; See Here,” while recognizing her work projects, focuses primarily on her dress, disregarding her innate dignity that is independent of the clothes she wears.

An ethics of care approach aims at avoiding making the media indifferent toward their sources and the topics of their news stories (Ward, 2019). Nevertheless, these articles’ failure to recognize the innate dignity of female actresses demonstrates a disregard for journalism ethics. In one of Mangalore Today news stories titled ‘Avneet Kaur sets Internet scorching in a strapless dress; flaunts hot curves in viral pics’, Kaur’s physical attributes dominate her other personal achievements. Ethical frameworks have been disregarded through depicting actresses as attractive people in order to satisfy society’s gaze (Mulvey, 1988). Through doing so, these news articles not only violate moral principles but also maintain societal norms that negatively affect the dignity of females, thus putting into question their right to live a dignified life (Das, 2020). These infractions lead to the objectification and commercialization of female actors by upholding detrimental norms and undermining their sense of dignity.

Under objectification, 85% of the sample stories dehumanize the women and make them objects of sexual arousal. Such stories focus on the physical attributes of the female performer for creating sensation but do not take into account the autonomy, dignity, and humanity of the woman. An example is Mangalore Today news story titled ‘Disha Patani raises the heat in very racy skintight dress, See pics’. In this article, the woman performer is objectified by presenting her as an object raising the heat. Another example is the article published in NDTV entitled ‘That’s Not A Neon Light Beaming At You, It’s Just Esha Gupta Going Boss Mode In A Green Pantsuit’. The same can be said about this story because the woman performer is objectified as a thing that beams like a neon light.

The objectification of female performers as nothing more than sexual beings perpetuates ideological, capitalist, and patriarchal ideas that emphasize women’s physical appearance over their identity (Patnaik, 2023). These news items reinforce the oppression and victimization of female performers through the removal of their identity and humanness. It also showcases a cultural practice in the media industry that prioritizes sensationalized click-bait journalism practices over morality. The sensationalisation

of the physical appeal of female performers disregards the moral aspect of treating people with dignity and respect, merely for the purpose of gaining more audiences and revenue from advertisements (Rahman, 2020). Thus, the objectification of female performers as sexual objects serves as a reminder of an outrageous ethical violation within the journalism profession, fostering negative human morality and damaging the integrity of media reporting (Sahoo, 2015). In conclusion, the objectification of female performers in news items is an unethical practice.

Think-Aloud Expressions

After coding all responses received, the following themes were identified, synthesizing patterns across the dataset and aligning with the study’s focus on ethical implications and societal repercussions of IDNM portrayals of female celebrities. Raw quotations from the think-aloud process are limited to highlighting theme patterns and theoretical ideas, and only a few instances are provided to highlight important conclusions (Table 5).

Pervasive Sexualization And Objectification

This theme focuses on how news stories emphasizing parts of celebrity bodies objectify them, in line with Nussbaum’s objectification theory (1995). This perspective emphasizes how treating individuals as mere instruments contributes to ethical lapses. A respondent’s statement, “She looks hot; loved it”, fits the objectification paradigm as articulated in Mulvey’s (1988) male gaze by prioritizing aesthetic appeal for male spectators. This finding exemplifies how sensationalistic language used in IDNM elicits desires that ‘stick’ to women, thus reproducing gender hierarchies through an affective economy as explained by Ahmed’s (2004) affective economies. By emphasizing the use of such terms as sexy or curves, the media places the celebrity in the Lacanian (1978) symbolic realm, whereby exposure triggers self-scrutiny, thereby forcing women to adhere to sexualized standards.

Critiques of this kind were common among the female participants with a participant saying “Worst selection of words, feel like women are being objectified.” This fulfills feminist care ethics (Held, 2005) and virtue ethics (Nussbaum, 2001) by recognizing celebrities’ humanity and upholding dignity. In this regard, the respondents wanted a representation based on virtue ethics, as per Nussbaum (2001), calling for representations that uphold dignity. These comments reflect a form of resistance to the disciplinary powers of the media as described by Foucault (1975) as panoptical gaze. Some of the respondents normalized this portrayal as evidenced in the comment, “Absolutely this kind of portrayals shall be normalised”. Assemblage theory, developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), explains how the headline, image, and algorithm work together to amplify sexualization at the expense of ethical considerations. Objectification theory explains how such portrayals may influence women’s self-

objectification. On the other hand, Ward (2016) associates such images with low esteem of women's abilities and increased sexism. This theme underscores IDNM's ethical failure to foster dignified representations, necessitating a shift toward media practices that value women's agency and complexity.

Affective Responses Shaping Gendered Perceptions

The concept of affective responses in gendered perception entails the emotions created through sensationalism that shape people's perception. The headlines and news stories create emotions, such as admiration, discomfort, or even disgust, which Ahmed (2004) describes as the ways the emotions created during sensationalism stick to the female body. "Hot person, black is very fashionable" was a statement made by a male participant of the study and can be attributed to his admiration of the female celebrity. As Mulvey (1988) explains, his admiration can be related to the male gaze which treats a woman like a spectacle for admiration only. Through the male gaze, the female celebrity becomes an aesthetic spectacle in which emotions created are used in gendering women. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) assemblage of news stories, algorithms, and user interactions also helps in explaining how gendering occurs through media sensationalism. Lacan's (1978) concept of the gaze explains the ways people internalize gender norms set by the media and create gendered perceptions of female celebrities.

The women who participated in the research felt a sense of anger towards the way women were portrayed by IDNM. For example, one woman stated, "Shame on news media! It is objectifying women". Such statements indicate the extent to which female celebrities are gendered through the media's gaze which fails to consider their other aspects aside from appearance. The feminist care ethics (Held, 2005) and virtue ethics (Nussbaum, 2001) can be considered here since female celebrities require respectful representations that take into consideration the various dimensions of their lives. Such an expression of dissatisfaction reflects a resistance against the disciplinary power (Foucault, 1975) inherent in the media gaze of IDNM. Nevertheless, some women admitted admiring the female celebrity. According to Ward (2016), emotions related to the female gaze make the audience sexist and reduce the perceptions of women's competence. Fox et al.'s (2015) objectification theory also indicates the connection between affective responses and self-objectification of women.

Tension Between Agency And Exploitation

In addition, the ethical dilemma in IDNM's representation of female celebrities shows the complexity in their portrayal. While female celebrities try to exert their self-representation efforts, this action is manipulated into exploitation. "Bold and Sexy Look; Nia Sharma Slays in Latest Photoshoot" demonstrates celebrities'

efforts of self-representation on their social media platforms, showing their self-agency. Yet, IDNM changes this self-representation into sexualized exploitation, as Nussbaum's objectification theory states. As a result, female respondents have responded, noting, "She's expressing herself, but they make it all about her body". Hence, IDNM exploits celebrity agency to appeal to the male gaze (Mulvey, 1988). Such responses indicate a care ethics perspective (Held, 2005) and demonstrate that people would like celebrities portrayed in accordance with their intentions and Lacan's gaze (1978), meaning that media visibility forces celebrities to become conscious of themselves. Indeed, Ahmed's (2004) affective economies work in cases of celebrities' exploitation, meaning that certain emotions attach to these stories and show that they represent gendered exploitation over agency.

The matter becomes complicated because IDNM manipulates algorithmic assemblages (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), creating sensationalized content and exploiting female celebrities in this way. As a result, a male respondent remarked, "Samantha Ruth is a good actress, and she should stand for good journalism", highlighting his view of a woman's agency but criticizing its exploitation in the media environment. In this regard, a care ethic perspective can be used, as virtue ethics (Nussbaum, 2001) requires that celebrities be respected for their professional merits. Moreover, as Foucault's panopticon approach indicates (1975), IDNM disciplines women to preserve their sexualized personas to stay in focus in society, as people learn from what the media offers. According to Ward (2016), the societal impact of the issue is linked with gendered stereotyping and limited women's agency because of it.

Normalization Of Sensationalism

Normalization through the increased acceptance of IDNM's use of provocative headlines as a normative media strategy is evident through such comments from the respondents as, "Good Strategy to invite readers". Indeed, frequent exposure to the sexualized depiction of females leads to the development of a particular attitude towards this phenomenon, as indicated by Foucault (1975) through the prism of his concepts of disciplinary power and panopticon, under which the media regulates the perception of femininity. Headlines, news articles, and algorithms contribute to sensationalism embedded in the context of media ecosystems (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). For instance, the statement of a male respondent, "Picture doing justice to the headline," implies the acceptance of sensationalism because of the recognition of its appropriateness and the establishment of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1988) and affective economy (Ahmed, 2004) in which desire becomes embodied on female bodies. Consequently, the normalization of sensationalism contradicts feminist care ethics (Held, 2005) advocating for empathic and multi-dimensional images of celebrities.



The normalization of sensationalism raises a significant number of ethical issues associated with the lack of need for respectful depictions promoted in the context of virtue ethics (Nussbaum, 2001). For example, one respondent noted, "To attract more audience and focus." Thus, IDNM pursues financial gains by resorting to sensationalism, whose acceptance can be considered in light of the Lacanian (1978) gaze in terms of the media's ability to influence public perceptions. At the same time, normalization of sexualization has serious social implications associated with the spread of negative stereotypes undermining women's rights and encouraging sexism, according to Ward (2016). The findings of Fox et al. (2015) regarding the theory of objectification show that women become self-objectifying agents through this phenomenon.

Ethical Critiques And Calls For Dignity

The other theme emerging in respondents' comments relates to ethical critiques and appeals for representation that respects the humanity of female celebrities. Critiques include provocations from headline content in combination with visuals, such as "Topless, like seriously? She is wearing a blazer! Media sucks", which is consistent with feminist care ethics (Held, 2005) because it requires empathy in understanding the multifaceted nature of celebrities. These comments represent critiques of objectification (Nussbaum, 1995), as they support virtue ethics (Nussbaum, 2001) by suggesting portrayals that embody moral excellence and dignified treatment. The theme is supported by the Lacanian gaze (1978), as respondents reject the media-induced gaze that turns women into objects of spectacle. In addition, respondents' emotions expressed within this theme align with the concepts of affective economies from Ahmed (2004), which suggest that emotions, including outrage, can attach themselves to certain portrayals to reinforce demands for change.

Moreover, IDNM's disciplinary power (Foucault, 1975) is challenged by respondents who seek to disrupt the panopticon gaze in order to break away from gender norms associated with female celebrities. For instance, one male comment states: "What is these curves and all, she is a human being", indicating that he refuses to fall under the male gaze (Mulvey, 1988). As a result, IDNM's assemblages (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) driven by the algorithm's priority of engagements become unethical, as the media commodifies its female subjects through sensationalist portrayals. The societal implications are considerable because Ward (2016) demonstrates that media contributes to more prevalent sexist behavior and lowers women's competence perception. Furthermore, according to the objectification theory developed by Fox et al. (2015), media objectifications contribute to women's self-objectification. Consequently, the theme of appeals for dignity, as exemplified by the critique of unnecessary sexualized language in the headline, reflects respondents' demand for ethical media portrayals.

Gendered Differences in Perception

In particular, there is a clear difference in how male and female respondents perceive the sensationalized images of female celebrities portrayed in IDNM, which reflects the effects of gendered socialization. For instance, the phrase "Stunning and extravagantly hot" exemplifies the male gaze of Mulvey (1988), where the respondent agrees with the headline "Sexy Pooja Hegde Flaunts Her Curves". This kind of reaction, motivated by affective economy (Ahmed, 2004), proves that certain emotions such as desire are attached to female bodies, making people look at women as aestheticized objects. Conversely, the respondents' perception of IDNM sensationalizing women could be described by the phrase "Shame on news media! It is objectifying women". This perception reflects feminist care ethics (Held, 2005), where individuals ask for empathy-based media depictions. Thus, different perceptions of IDNM's assemblages (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), created by media algorithms that amplify provocative content, reflect the needs of males that are addressed by IDNM while leaving females dissatisfied.

As opposed to males who are usually indifferent to sensationalizing female figures in media, females tend to use virtue ethics (Nussbaum, 2001). For example, the phrase "It should be called Women's Media. No more pornographic stories about girls" demonstrates that women care about their dignity more than about being aesthetically pleasing. Conversely, the media normalization of sexually charged pictures is reflected in male perception, according to Foucault (1975), when sexualized depictions become a societal norm. At the same time, the Lacanian gaze theory (1978) explains the reasons behind different perceptions, as females avoid objectifying themselves whereas men are subjected to such an objectivization process. Thus, as stated by Ward (2016), gender perceptions reinforce sexism, whereby males admire women while females criticize it (Fox et al., 2015).

In this respect, thematic analysis of think-aloud reactions suggests that the female celebrities presented by IDNM have become the victims of pervasive sexualization and objectification, which have evoked affective reactions such as admiration and discomfort that influence gendered perception of individuals, often legitimizing sensationalism in the media environment. Some respondents acknowledged that despite recognizing the agency of celebrities, IDNM presented them within exploitative discourse due to the tendency to use algorithmic assemblages of provocative images for the sake of engaging the audience rather than focusing on the moral aspects of the issue (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Female respondents who emphasized the importance of ethical journalism suggested respecting their agency through providing proper representation of females in accordance with feminist care ethics (Held, 2005) and virtue ethics (Nussbaum, 2001). Nevertheless,

the differences between gender perception of celebrities' presentation were indicative of the existence of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1988) and disciplinary power (Foucault, 1975), which is facilitated by affective economies (Ahmed, 2004) and Lacanian gaze (1978).

CONCLUSION

The depiction of female celebrity identities on the IDNM website is heavily influenced by factors associated with the drive toward algorithmic amplification, a click-based revenue model, and virality. According to the findings of the thematic analysis, the portrayal of female celebrities in media headlines is predominantly presented in terms of being an object of sexualization, using labels like 'bold', 'curves', and 'cleavage' to mask any notion of agency or multiple identities. Such practices have been shown to lead to a disturbing phenomenon of women becoming reifications, or objects turned into objects whose value lies only in generating clicks. Reification involves the process through which the human attributes are objectified (Feenberg, 2015). It can thus be observed how the identities of women become mere visualizations that lack any depth of human experience or personality.

The above mentioned phenomenon has been noted especially in a setting where soft-core sexualization is already a known part of the entertainment journalism landscape. When headlines talk about the star being 'showing off her curves' or 'ratcheting up the heat', this reflects not only the editorial decision, but a structure of content that operates on visual pleasure as its main motive force. According to Gill's (2007) analysis of post-feminist media culture, it allows for the creation of a certain kind of identity that girls and women are able to develop, providing agency, which allows for the formation of a self very similar to the one depicted in the male heterosexual pornographic fantasy.

In this regard, data from think-aloud expressions have helped to better understand how media depictions affect the perception of audience, thus fulfilling the purpose of the paper. A conflict between the attitude of admiration and disapproval is evident, thus reflecting the main question regarding how the IDNM platforms construct their celebrities' identities, and what are the social implications of such a construction.

The above dynamic reinforces the formation of a digital patriarchy, whereby content creation is geared towards male consumption at the expense of the dignity and personhood of women. This is supported by Ward's claims (2016) that frequent viewing of sexualized content reduces the perception of female competence, as noted by the participants' perceptions. The phenomenon is described as a form of 'popular misogyny', whereby female visibility is premised on the performance of beauty and eroticism for a watching audience. This also aligns with the notion of 'entrepreneurial femininity' by Duffy and

Hund (2015), whereby women are encouraged to pursue self-branding, which relies on the codes, processes, and logics of mainstream culture industries.

Despite the fact that these celebrities maintain their digital personae through social media and other means, the yellow journalism here reduces everything to salaciousness in headlines that reduce these individuals' personae to this level, thereby reflecting Mulvey's "male gaze" theory (1988). However, in an Indian setting characterized by deeply patriarchal societies, the consequences of such de-contextualizing language are even more profound. The presentation of women as sexualized icons within online news media helps perpetuate a society characterized not just by structural symbolic violence, but one that also determines what is desired.

Such practices are indicative of the degradation of journalistic ethics, putting economic gain over moral principles, and digital technology as a whole working against the ethical representation of women. It is essential for discussions about the ethics of digital media to focus not just on the sensational nature of such practices but as actual ethical violations that threaten the common good. In light of all of these issues, and in line with the theories of virtue ethics (Nussbaum, 2001) and feminist care ethics (Held, 2005), new procedures in IDNM must be adopted as compassionate and respectful practices. For example, the implementation of changes in journalism by adopting practices that make headlines on the basis of professional accomplishments, rather than physique, would be one such measure to take. Also, it is crucial to impose stricter controls on the language used, along with mandatory training of journalists about ethical principles as regards the complex nature of women.

Although this study focuses on four prominent IDNM sites, the entire gamut of India's expansive and diverse digital media landscape remains to be explored. The use of think-aloud feedback from 36 literate urban youth reduces the domain of measurements, yet quantitative surveys conducted on a larger scale can be useful in collecting further data, and including adolescents in the sample may help understand the effects that these representations have on different age groups. In addition, longitudinal studies looking into the execution and impact of journalistic ethics can shed light on their ability to counter sensationalism.

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