

## Reel Inclusion, Real Impact: LGBTQIA+ Visibility, Sustainability, and the Pink Economy in Contemporary Indian Cinema

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### Abstract

The increasing economic visibility and participation of LGBTQIA+ communities started being referred as Rainbow Economy. Sometimes it is also used as a synonym of Pink Economy that was coined in 1990s when business researchers started recognising the economic prospect in reaching out to the LGBTQIA+ people as potential consumers. 'Out of the Closet and Into the Marketplace: The Birth of India's Pink Economy', the executive report of MSL group India highlighted the potential of LGBT community to become a distinct consumer segment. The decriminalisation of homosexuality in 2018 in India ensured inclusion in education, employment, and social recognition. United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) play an important role in policy shifts and media practices. In this changing scenario, role of media in shaping youth perceptions of economic and social belonging remains underexplored. This qualitative study explores the changing content in Indian audiovisual media in the context of pink economy. The methodology combines a critical review of interdisciplinary literature on queer youth, and cultural economy, thematic content analysis of four media texts - Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui (2021), Taali (2023), Subh mangal Zyada Savdhan (2020), and Made in Heaven Season 1&2 (2023). Focused group discussions (FGDs) with young viewers further inform the analysis by examining audience reception and meaning-making processes. The study is theoretically grounded in queer theory and youth cultural studies to understand how marginalisation is constructed, negotiated, and challenged through media narratives. Findings indicate greater visibility of LGBTQIA+ characters result in challenging dominant norms and foster social acceptance among youth audiences. The study argues that media functions as a critical site for developing theoretical and social understanding of LGBTQIA+ people. Greater normalisation may bring change in social perception, but for real inclusion as enumerated in sustainable development goals, there is a long way to go.

**Keywords:** LGBTQIA+ Youth, Marginalisation, Pink Economy, Media Representation, Queer Theory, Indian Media.

### Introduction

The emergence of the Pink Economy, also referred to as the Rainbow Economy, has drawn growing scholarly and policy attention to the economic visibility and participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) communities worldwide. The concept highlights the expanding recognition of LGBTQIA+ individuals as consumers, professionals, entrepreneurs, and contributors to national economies (Badgett, 2018). In India, this recognition has gained momentum alongside legal reforms, policy shifts, and increased media visibility.

Heteronormative family expectations often regulate acceptable expressions of gender and sexuality. They become silent, feel coerced, and excluded. Due to lack of adequate inclusive policies and social prejudices against them often promoted by cinema, the queer youth become victims of discrimination and harassment in educational institutions and workplaces. Most workplaces remain structured around normative assumptions that marginalize gender non-conforming identities. These experiences collectively constrain access to economic opportunity and reinforce cycles of social exclusion (Dutta, 2012).

The adoption of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by India in 2015 has brought back focus on inclusion and equity. SDGs 5, 8, and 10, namely the goals of gender equality, decent work, and reduced inequalities, indicate the necessity to solve structural challenges facing marginalized communities. However, the youth members of the LGBTQIA+ community do not receive due attention in development-related academic studies, in particular in those that discuss the impact of culture and media on societal attitudes and economic prospects.

Under such circumstances, media proves to be a valuable cultural and pedagogical space in which meanings of identity, belonging, and economic legitimacy are constructed. The importance of media representations as means of producing social knowledge, attitudes, and norms was emphasized by Hall (1997) as he highlighted the fact that youth audiences learn about society through media. Cinema and online streamings have become highly influential in India in terms of the construction of the narrative about gender, sexuality, success, and citizenship. It has been noted that the representation of LGBTQIA+ individuals in Indian media has been either non-existent or stereotypical and aimed at the reinforcement of deviance, tragedy, and ridicule. Hence, stigma persists and exclusion is justified (Ghosh, 2016).

Media in India has seen several changes in recent times, especially because of the emergence of digital media platforms. These changes have made the representation of LGBTQIA+ community more nuanced.

However, little is known about the impact of media on the way LGBTQIA+ youth identify themselves and perceive their social and economic inclusivity. Although existing literature covers aspects such as queer representation and economic inclusion separately, there is a lack of scholarly attempts to link media discourse and socioeconomic context and policies together. It is therefore necessary to decode the processes of marginalization, identity formation, and economic engagement of selected media texts through the lens of the Pink Economy. According to Bandura (2001), youth audiences are not simply passive consumers of media; they are engaged in interpretation and negotiation of mediated messages and can be influenced by them.

In this study, four media texts have been chosen namely *Shubh Mangal Zayda Savdhaan* (2020), *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (2021), *Taali* (2023), and *Made in Heaven Season 2* (2023) all of which centre on queer identities as well as relationships of work, family, and social negotiation. These media texts become important for analysis in the present study because they deal with the topic of youth, professional lives, and legitimacy issues and thus provide interesting material to study the way the new characters representing the LGBTQIA community are portrayed.

The theoretical framework of this study combines three theories - Queer Theory, Media Effects Theory and Sustainable Development Theory. Queer Theory rejects the construction of identity through normative gender roles and sexual norms by considering identity as fluid, performative and socially constructed (Butler, 1990). Studies from youth culture see youth as the agentive constructors of their own meanings through cultural texts (Bennett, 2007). The research methodology involves qualitative research design where an interdisciplinary literature review, content analysis of selected films and web series and focus group discussions (FGDs) are employed among youth audiences. Content analysis includes analysis of the portrayal of identity, marginalization, aspirations and economic agency (Krippendorff, 2018).

## **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

### **• The Pink Economy: Global and Indian Perspectives**

The Pink Economy is an alternative name for the Rainbow Economy. These terms imply the overall economic influence, market involvement, and work participation of LGBTQIA+ communities. According to Shapiro (2018), the author states that LGBTQIA+ customers form a powerful group of people who make their mark in the world, affecting fashion, tourism, entertainment, healthcare, and technology industries. The person who initiated this econometric transition, Professor M.V. Lee Badgett,

managed to calculate exactly the price of excluding queers from society in her studies. In regard to developing countries, Badgett (2014) found that homophobia and discrimination costs India about 1.7% of its total GDP per year. Being excluded from the society implies that talented queers either migrate or experience significant stress while working, which affects the performance of corporations negatively. Estimations show that LGBTQIA+ communities include trillions of dollars of purchasing power per year (Badgett, 2014). Academicians state that the Pink Economy is not only a market, but also a cultural economy based on visibility, identity politics, and access to recognition (Armitage, 2020).

From a global perspective, there is evidence to show a correlation between LGBTQIA+ inclusivity and economic development. Studies on a cross-national level have shown that nations that provide more protection and social acceptance of sexual minorities experience better economic growth, productivity, and human development (Badgett, Nezhad, Waaldijk, & van der Meulen Rodgers, 2014). These studies highlight the economic impact of discriminatory practices while reinforcing that inclusion fosters innovation, productivity, and economic resilience. Hence, the concept of Pink Economy emerges as a rights issue as well as an economic necessity within the context of development literature.

Concerning the Pink Economy within India, academic studies on this topic are emerging. Kumar and Singh (2021) suggest that LGBTQIA+ groups can contribute substantially to the economy of India by engaging in labour, starting businesses, and being consumers. Systematic data collection is limited because of underreporting and stigma. Decriminalizing same-sex relations in 2018 was a crucial step towards recognizing the rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals (Narain, 2014). Nonetheless, legal changes do not translate into overcoming structural barriers in areas such as education, employment, health care services, and upward social mobility (Marlow & Trivedi, 2018).

The economic importance of LGBTQ+ consumers was also acknowledged in the context of the "pink economy." According to Ashraf Engineer, content head at MSL India, the value of the pink economy around the world can be anywhere between \$200 and \$600 billion. The value is estimated by the following quote, "If even India accounts for a fraction of this pie, the pink economy is going to be worth several thousand crores of rupees" (Engineer, as cited in The Telegraph India, n.d.). The example above illustrates how economically important the LGBTQ+ consumers might be for the Indian market.

The perception of purchasing power among the LGBTQ+ community has also played an important role in the increasing importance of this consumer base. Nitin Karani, equity research editor, and gay rights advocate describes LGBTQ+ consumers as "good spenders," especially in sectors such as clothing, gadgets, travel, grooming, alcohol, and entertainment (Karani, as cited in The Telegraph India, n.d.).

Engagement with the Pink Economy by corporations demonstrates progress and contradictions. There has been an increase in diversity policies, employee resource groups, and LGBTQIA+ inclusive branding by multinational and Indian companies, reflecting greater acceptance of queer talents and consumers (Fidas & Cooper, 2018). However, researchers argue that there are dangers of performative inclusion and "pinkwashing," which involves gestures of support without any actual changes in terms of inclusive hiring, promotion and protection of LGBT individuals in the workplace (Duggan, 2002; Puar, 2007). This issue is especially relevant for India where corporate inclusiveness is limited to metropolitan and elite spaces and does not take into account the needs of marginalized queer youth.

Youth engagement in the Pink Economy is understudied, yet important. Marginalization of LGBTQIA+ youth can be caused by several factors including their young age, reliance on family structure, lack of economic independence, and intersectional marginalization connected to caste, class, and regional factors.

#### • **Media Representation of LGBTQIA+ Communities and Youth**

Media representation is vital in determining cultural meanings, social values, and public opinions since media itself is involved in identity creation and legitimization and exclusion of certain types of belonging (Hall, 1997; Couldry, 2012). For the LGBTQIA+ community, representation is particularly important since visibility within media precedes recognition and political engagement. When in societies non-normative sexualities and gender identifications are stigmatized and marginalized, media narratives serve as spaces for naming and negotiating identities.

Traditionally, Indian cinema was ambivalent in terms of its representation of queerness. Most of the early representations have been based on heteronormativity. Queer people have been represented using caricature, jokes, or deviation, thus contributing to their social exclusion (Ghosh, 2016; Jain, 2022).

There has been no narrative development or agency in queer characters, who were often marginalized and excluded from the normative trajectory of family, work, and citizenship. Such kind of representation leads to what Gross (2001) calls "symbolic annihilation" of marginalized groups.

In the last few decades, however, there have been representations of more diverse and complex lives of members of the LGBTQIA+ community in India's ever-evolving media landscape. Modern films and web series depict queers not only as tragic or deviant but as nuanced and complicated individuals struggling with their emotions and their personal, professional, and social lives. It has been noted by scholars that these changes are the result of cultural evolution and the effects of global queer discourses (Dey & Doley, 2024; Rao, 2020).

Young adulthood is the period when one's sense of identity is shaped through various sources including media. The field of youth media studies has shown that young people are involved in interpreting media content critically and actively instead of being its passive receivers (Buckingham, 2008; Bennett, 2007). Young LGBTQIA+ people use media as a way of validating themselves in environments where they do not have any support or information.

According to Craig et al. (2015), the media can be a powerful tool in fostering resilience among LGBTQ youth. The authors use qualitative information to show that positive portrayals of individuals can give the youth language and inspiration with which they can cope with stigma.

Queer characters portrayed in media spaces of work, consumption, and ambition contribute to reconfiguring LGBTQIA+ as economically valuable and socially legitimate citizens. According to scholars, media portrayals are useful in fostering the cultural acceptance of the Pink Economy through connecting recognition of identity with participation in economy (Sender, 2012; Armitage, 2020).

However, in the case of India, existing literature lacks an understanding of the relationship between media representations and economic inclusion outcomes among LGBTQIA+ youth. There is no research showing how media representations of LGBTQIA+ youth are useful in fostering employment opportunities. Research in India either discusses media visibility of queer youth or focuses on economic discrimination against them. However, based on social cognitive theory, existing research shows that media portrayals can have a profound effect on the youth career aspirations and self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001).

- **Inclusivity, Social Justice, and the SDG Framework**

"No one must be left behind" is the phrase used by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015). Examples of goals like SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) indicate the significance of empowering marginalized communities, which include sexual and gender minorities. The SDG India Index 2023–24 reports the existence of persistent inequalities in terms of employment and social mobility in disadvantaged communities and underscores the necessity of making interventions that would address these inequalities (UNDP India, 2024).

The Theory of Sustainable Development focuses on the combination of social equity, economic opportunities, and inclusiveness in development projects (WCED, 1987). Current academic studies exploring the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people into society argue that exclusion and discrimination involve economic costs and prevent sustainable development outcomes. The work of Lee Badgett with the World Bank indicates that discrimination and stigma may cause lower levels of economic output in national economies and lower efficiency of utilization of human resources (Badgett, 2014). Data obtained during cross-national analyses reveal the positive correlation between higher levels of legal inclusion of LGBTQ+ people and higher per capita GDP and human development indexes (Badgett et al., 2019).

- **Theoretical Gaps and Research Opportunity**

There have been studies conducted on the subject of representation of LGBTQIA+, economic inclusion, and sustainable development; however, very few of them are holistic in nature, and even fewer specifically target youth. In most cases, the study is focused on either cultural representation or economic inclusion, and there is no mention of the way media acts as a medium that influences the economic agency of the LGBTQIA+ youth. This study bridges this void.

- **Theoretical Framework**

An interdisciplinary approach is used in this research, incorporating Queer Theory, Media Effects Theory, and Sustainable Development Theory.

Queer Theory disrupts the normative assumptions of the world of gender and sexuality by stressing on fluidity, resistance, and subversion (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990). In India, Queer Theory serves as a way to analyze media stories of negotiation around visibility, stigma, and heteronormativity.

Media Effects Theory emphasizes that positive media portrayal can affect acceptance and aspirations of youth (McInroy & Craig, 2017).

The theory of Sustainable Development stresses the importance of integration of social equity and economic opportunity. By connecting media portrayals to socio-economic consequences, this study sees movies and digital content as tools of sustainable development (WCED, 1987; Badgett, 2014; Badgett et al., 2019; Bibliometric analysis of the media-sustainable development nexus, 2025).

Combined together, they provide for an inter-disciplinary framework, which considers queer media representations from the perspective of larger socio-economic and developmental settings, with specific emphasis on youth involvement and empowerment.

### Methodology

To capture the intersection of economics, media representation, and public perception, this study employs a three-pronged qualitative research design:

- **Literature Review:** A synthesis of secondary macroeconomic data, institutional reports (UN, World Bank), and econometric models established by Prof. M.V. Lee Badgett regarding the GDP impacts of exclusion.
- **Content Analysis:** Thematic content analysis was conducted to identify recurring motifs related to LGBTQIA+ identity, social negotiation, and economic participation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Four primary Indian media texts spanning cinema and Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms: *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, *Made in Heaven (Season 2)*, *Taali*, and *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* were analyzed based on the specific socio-legal issues they touched upon in the context of pink economy and the strong narratives they created.
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** To achieve a nuanced understanding of youth perceptions, two separate FGDs were conducted. A purposive sampling method was utilized to select urban youth with basic spoken English skills. A total of 24 participants took part, consisting of 18 girls and 6 boys, all falling within the age bracket of **18 to 26 years**. This specific demographic represents the emerging cohort of primary urban consumers and young working professionals. For ease of recording and anonymity, participants were assigned codes:

**FGD 1:** P1 to P12

**FGD 2:** P1 to P12

Each discussion lasted for about 90 minutes and used the semi-structured discussion guide to understand the participant's perceptions regarding LGBTQIA+ representation, awareness of their economic involvement, and how media stories shape social attitudes and views of youths (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The FGDs were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was conducted post-facto. The main concepts identified in the discussion guide were open-coded first and subsequently coded into broader themes of affirmation, negotiation, and inclusion.

- **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical practices have been maintained in the research. All participants gave consent for the research, and proper confidentiality of the information collected was ensured. The participants were made aware of the voluntary aspect of participation, along with the right to leave the study at any point. Ethical practices of conducting interviews in an encouraging and respectful manner have been practiced to ensure the safety of the participant (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

- **Rationale for Methodology**

The combined research methodology involving content analysis and FGD will help to gain a holistic picture of how media representations and their interpretation by the audience can affect the socio-economic life of the LGBTQIA+ community. Thematic coding will help to analyze patterns in the representations, social attitudes, and socio-economic involvement and connect them to theoretical frameworks. Queer theory will serve as a perspective on how the process of resisting the normative constructions of gender and sexuality is carried out (Butler, 1990; Hall, 1997), Media Effects Theory explains how media exposure affects people's attitudes and behavior (Bandura, 2001; McQuail, 2010),

while Sustainable Development Theory helps to analyze representation through the prism of inclusion, equity, and empowerment of youth in line with SDGs (United Nations, 2015).

### Findings and Discussion

The results of the current research provide insight into the complex and intertwined connection between media portrayal, social acknowledgment, and economic inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community in India. Media can be effectively utilized for social advocacy, policy making pertaining to the LGBTQIA+ community, and recognition of their economic contributions which address structural disparities. In the corporate world, media can transform through its power of sensitizing the employees and overcoming the implicit bias.

- **From Real-Life Stigma to Reel-World Markets**

The content analysis reveals how modern media acts as a bridge between structural legal battles and the commercialization of the pink economy.

- **Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan: The Mass-Market Downscaling**

Real-life story of a marriage between Keshav Suri, the heir of LaLiT Group, and his French boyfriend formed the premise of the movie Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan. Through setting a gay relationship within the ambit of a regular, conservative family in a small town, the movie consciously created mass visibility and acceptance. It was crucial for the creation of a large market through which a small legal discourse could be transformed into a mainstream family acceptance discourse.

- **Made in Heaven (Season 1&2): Aspirational Capital and Corporate Integration**

In comparison to the middle-class environment, the OTT series, Made in Heaven (Season 2) looks at stories of contemporary elite and urban life. In the text, a gay businessperson, Karan Mehta is portrayed as a main character while another character, Meher is introduced as a transgender production designer working in an eminent wedding planner organization. This was not only about representation and visibility. These characters were authentic, strong and aspirational. There was huge potential in the rainbow economy. Through the portrayal of successful and skilled queer characters who contribute to luxury businesses, the series normalizes the actual inclusion of the individuals in workplaces.

- **Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui: The Transgender Consumer and the Luxury Market**

Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui gives an unprecedented representation of a transgender woman's successful transition in the midst of her visibility as an urban elite consumer. She is shown as a successful individual and a perfect fit for the target market of mainstream beauty products, well-being facilities, and high-end clothing lines. Her consumer behavior, in this regard, serves to establish a link between gender identity and market participation. This helps to show that trans visibility is not only about social triumph, but is a valuable marketing tool for the pink economy.

- **Taali: The Hard Socio-Legal Battle**

In this regard, the series Taali brings into the discourse the harsh realities of life through the legal fights faced by the transgender community in India. The storyline revolves around the struggle for identity recognition and legal provisions as well as basic civil rights. Through the focus on the tough battles which preceded landmark court decisions, Taali gives a socio-legal perspective which is important to understand the rainbow economy. This is because economic engagement is only possible through full legal recognition.

- **Youth perceptions and economic reality**

The information obtained from the two Focus Group Discussions (FGD 1 and FGD 2) showed an extremely coherent and sophisticated response pattern from the youth in urban areas (age 18 – 26). Contrary to accepting all queer media representations unconditionally, the respondents showed their understanding of how media storytelling shapes societal and economic systems.

- **The Cyclical Impact of Media Representation**

A recurring theme of consensus across both focus group discussions was the circular relationship between visibility and public awareness. Respondents were of the opinion that the content produced in media works as a filter that influences public understanding of the minorities. One participant explained this very phenomenon saying,

"The perception and attitude of people often is shaped by the way marginalised people are represented." (FGD 1, P5)

In this way, negative portrayal makes an already complex identity into a joke, further entrenching social prejudice and slowing down the process of integration of marginalised groups into the market place.

#### ▪ **The Relationship Between Normalization and Economy**

There was clear validation of the idea behind the concept of rainbow economy, as the focus groups established a direct link between the normalisation of the queers and tangible economic gains. As one participant said,

"Normalisation of queer and transgender characters can bring positive impact in society and that will be economically more positive." (FGD 2, P3)

This was completely in line with the arguments put forth by Prof. Lee Badgett regarding the reduction of anxiety and utilising human potential at the macro-level. As social stigma reduces, so does the productivity increase and economic costs decrease.

#### ▪ **The Role of Social Media in Market Expansion**

Other than traditional cinema and OTT streaming channels, the interviewees perceived digital media platforms to be an important infrastructure resource for amplifying the pink economy. Since traditional broadcasting media is constrained by long corporate production timelines, digital platforms serve as immediate tools for creating communities, positioning brands, and mobilizing consumers. One of the interviewees explained the importance of the above infrastructure resource in the following manner:

"The role of social media is immense to strengthen rainbow economy." (FGD 2, P7)

#### ▪ **Structural Integration versus Performative Representation**

Eventually, the youth went beyond the screen to demand tangible institutional transformations. There were six separate interviewees who emphasized the necessity of making structural changes for inclusion. The inclusion of queer individuals in actual workplaces and educational institutions is the only method for overcoming biases.

#### • **Limitations**

However, there are some limitations to this study. There was a limited sample of media, which means that this study might not be representative of India's media in general because the media scene is quite dynamic and varied. Moreover, there was a predominance of urban respondents with underrepresentation of the voices of rural people and intersectional identities, including caste, class, religion, and disability.

The marginalisation of the LGBTQIA+ youth in India is reinforced through intersectionality based on various factors, including caste, class, religion, regional affiliation, and disability. Consequently, economic visibility is not always equal to economic justice, especially when it comes to young LGBTQIA+ individuals who struggle with structural inequality on multiple fronts (Crenshaw, 1991; Dutta & Roy, 2014).

There could be a need for future research conducted in a longitudinal way to look at how exposure to media impacts attitudes and policies over time. The study could also cover other types of media, such as regional cinema and vernacular digital media. Additionally, quantitative methods could be used alongside qualitative ones.

#### **Conclusion**

In its examination of the role played by media in the social and economic inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in India, this study highlights the power of media in bringing about transformation. This research shows that the authentic representation of LGBTQIA+ people in movies and on web-based platforms serves as an instrument of identity confirmation, social recognition, and economic inclusion.

Moreover, the importance of interdisciplinary study of media, queer theory, and development studies is revealed in this study. This kind of interdisciplinary study can provide a comprehensive understanding of representation, policies, business practices, and community involvement in creating a pathway towards sustainable and inclusive inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

What is also noteworthy is the positioning of Pink Economy in India in this research. The study suggests that cultural representation mediated through storytelling makes it possible for LGBTQIA+ people to get legitimacy in society and to empower themselves economically.

These findings encourage policymakers, content producers, researchers, and business organizations to treat media as an important platform for creating sustainable social change.

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