



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY

Kanchan K. Malik,
University of Hyderabad, India

REVIEWED BY

Rini B. Mehta,
University of Illinois at
Urbana-Champaign, United States
Neethu S. Nair,
University of Mumbai, India

*CORRESPONDENCE

Kanika K. Arya
✉ kanikakachru@gmail.com

RECEIVED 23 November 2025

REVISED 09 February 2026

ACCEPTED 06 March 2026

PUBLISHED 31 March 2026

CITATION

Arya KK and Verma M (2026) Streaming
diplomacy and the evolution of Hindi
cinema: from Bollywood to digital
narratives.
Front. Commun. 11:1752623.
doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2026.1752623

COPYRIGHT

© 2026 Arya and Verma. This is an
open-access article distributed under
the terms of the [Creative Commons
Attribution License \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). The use,
distribution or reproduction in other
forums is permitted, provided the
original author(s) and the copyright
owner(s) are credited and that the
original publication in this journal is
cited, in accordance with accepted
academic practice. No use, distribution
or reproduction is permitted which does
not comply with these terms.

Streaming diplomacy and the evolution of Hindi cinema: from Bollywood to digital narratives

Kanika K. Arya^{1*} and Manish Verma²

¹Lemark Design and Media Academy, Matunga, India, ²Bahrain Polytechnic, Isa Town, Bahrain

Hindi cinema and Hindi-language television have historically occupied a significant position within Indian media culture, shaping national imaginaries and circulating India's cultural soft power through theatrical exhibition and broadcast television. Though it has been one of the most popular forms of Indian screen culture; Indian cinema in its entirety, has maintained a sustained global presence—from the international recognition of Bengali cinema through filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray, particularly with *Pather Panchali* (1955), to the contemporary global circulation of regionally rooted blockbusters such as *RRR* (Rajamouli, 2022) and *Kantara* (Shetty, 2022), signalling the continuing international prominence of Indian screen cultures across linguistic and industrial contexts. This paper examines how contemporary Hindi web series and OTT cinema reconfigure India's long-standing soft power legacy by extending it into the domain of streaming diplomacy. While recent pan-Indian and transnational films—such as *Baahubali* (Rajamouli, 2015), *RRR*, and *All We Imagine as Light* (Kapadia, 2024) continue to play a significant role in reshaping India's global cultural presence through theatrical circulation and international festival circuits, this study deliberately narrows its focus to *Hindi screen culture*. It argues that this transformation is marked by the adoption of technical, aesthetic, and narrative strategies aligned with western, platform-driven production cultures, while simultaneously revising earlier Hindi screen traditions grounded in popular aesthetics and cultural specificity. Rather than emerging solely from creative innovation, these shifts are shaped by the structural pressures of platform capitalism, algorithmic governance, and market-oriented regimes of global visibility that increasingly mediate how India is projected on international platforms. Through textual analysis of *Call Me Bae* (D'Cunha, 2024) and *Ctrl* (Motwane, 2024), the paper explores how selective Hindi-language OTT texts focus individuality, postfeminist subjectivities, and anxieties surrounding social media, artificial intelligence, and digitally mediated intimacy. These narratives mark a departure from the collectivist ethos, melodramatic modes, and culturally embedded formats historically associated with Hindi cinema and television, even as they retain recognisably 'desi' narrative frames to ensure local resonance. Hindi screen culture has long been approached through a critical lens, often characterised as ahistorical, escapist, excessively melodramatic, and shaped by fragmented modes of production. However, the emergence of streaming platforms has significantly reoriented this landscape. OTT ecosystems have enabled greater narrative risk, more coherent production logics, and the sustained exploration of niche themes that were previously marginal within mainstream Hindi cinema and television. Freed from the constraints of box-office imperatives and broadcast scheduling, Hindi web series and OTT films increasingly engage with globally resonant concerns—such as gender politics, digital labour, surveillance, and urban precarity—while remaining embedded in local cultural idioms. In this sense, streaming does not simply correct earlier limitations of Hindi screen culture; it reorganises its aesthetic and ideological

priorities, allowing melodrama and spectacle to be reworked into longer, more reflexive, and internationally legible forms of storytelling. Situating these developments within the framework of streaming diplomacy, the paper argues that Hindi-language OTT content continues to generate media-driven soft power by enabling culturally specific stories to circulate globally through platform infrastructures. The international recognition of *Delhi Crime* (Mehta, 2019), which won the International Emmy Award in 2020, demonstrates how Hindi-centric narratives can achieve global legitimacy. Its circulation alongside globally successful platform originals such as *Stranger Things* (Duffer Brothers, 2016) and *Dark* (Odar and Friese, 2017–2020) enhances visibility while subtly regulating form and content through platform norms. The paper concludes that Hindi OTT cinema and web series constitute an ambivalent cultural space in which India's soft power is amplified and new representational possibilities particularly around gender, individuality, and digital life emerge, even as creative practices remain shaped by platform imperatives and global market logics.

KEYWORDS

cultural soft power, digital subjectivity, Hindi cinema, Hindi-language OTT content, platform capitalism, post-feminism, streaming diplomacy

Introduction

Since its emergence in the early twentieth century, Indian cinema has functioned as more than popular entertainment, serving as a key site of cultural production, ideological negotiation, and social imagination across diverse linguistic and regional contexts. Early film historiography through the writings of Chidananda Das Gupta, Satyajit Ray, and Firoze Rangoonwala—foregrounded cinema's role in shaping public consciousness and engaging questions of realism, nationalism, and social reform in postcolonial India. Das Gupta's (2008) *Seeing Is Believing* and Ray's essays, particularly *Our Films, Their Films* (1976), remain foundational to this discourse. Building on this groundwork, later scholars—among many who have contributed to the study of Indian cinema—such as Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Ravi Vasudevan, and M. Madhava Prasad developed more theoretically inflected analyses of cinema as an ideological and cultural formation. Rajadhyaksha's *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid* (2009) and Vasudevan's *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema* (2000) examined cinema's relationship to modernity and melodrama, while Prasad's seminal *The Ideology of Hindi Cinema* (1998) conceptualised Hindi cinema¹ as a dominant national-popular form structured through narrative conventions, melodramatic excess, and star systems.

¹ *Hindi cinema* refers to the body of films produced primarily in Hindi in Bombay (now Mumbai) from the early twentieth century, historically characterised by diverse aesthetic traditions, studio-era modes of production, and narratives shaped by nationalism, social reform, and popular melodrama. Until the late twentieth century, the industry lacked a unified industrial or global brand identity and was commonly described as *Bombay cinema* or simply *Hindi cinema*. Although the term *Bollywood* circulated informally from the 1970s, it acquired analytical and institutional significance only after India's economic liberalisation in 1991, when shifts towards corporatisation, transnational finance, overseas markets, satellite television, and later digital platforms reconfigured the industry's scale, address, and visibility. As Ashish Rajadhyaksha argues, *Bollywood* denotes a post-liberalisation cultural-industrial formation oriented towards global consumption and spectacle rather than a mere synonym for Hindi cinema, while Madhava Prasad cautions that the naturalisation of the term risks flattening the historical and aesthetic heterogeneity of earlier Hindi film practices.

Indian cinema has never been monolithic. Alongside Hindi cinema, regional industries—Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Bengali, and Kannada and many others have played a critical role in shaping industrial practices, popular culture, and trans-regional circulation. Tamil cinema's sustained commercial success and its entanglement with political culture, Telugu cinema's recent global visibility through large-scale spectacles such as *RRR* (Rajamouli, 2022), and Kannada cinema's rise via films like *Kantara* (Shetty, 2022) highlight the increasing international prominence of regionally rooted narratives. These developments signal a shift in the global reception of Indian cinema beyond strictly Hindi-centric frameworks, while reaffirming Indian cinema's long-standing presence within world cinema circuits.

Major contemporary achievements include the Best Director award in the Orizzonti section at the Venice Film Festival for Anuparna Roy (2025) for *Songs of Forgotten Trees*, marking a historic first for an Indian director at Venice; the Grand Prix win at the Cannes Film Festival for *All We Imagine as Light* by Payal Kapadia (2024), the first such honour for an Indian woman filmmaker; and the Academy Award for Best Documentary Short Film for *The Elephant Whisperers* (Gonsalves, 2023), signalling the global resonance of Indian stories across fiction and non-fiction forms. Together, these recognitions reaffirm Indian cinema's sustained presence within global circuits of prestige and cultural visibility.

Within this plural cinematic landscape, Hindi cinema nevertheless emerged as the most visible strand in the post-independence period. Following economic liberalisation in the 1990s, the term 'Bollywood' gained currency to describe a reconfigured industrial and cultural formation oriented toward global markets, diasporic audiences, and transnational capital. As Dwyer (2011) argues, Bollywood functions as a 'cinematic public culture' where debates around gender, religion, consumption, and nationhood are staged and contested. Rajadhyaksha (2003, 2009, 2016) situates Bollywood within a transnational cultural economy, while Thussu (2013, 2016, 2020) extends this analysis to demonstrate how Indian media industries—across cinema, television, and later streaming platforms—have operated as conduits of cultural diplomacy and soft power.

Historically, Hindi cinema's ideological entanglement with nationalism and geopolitics must be located within the broader trajectory of

Indian cinema. From Dadasaheb Phalke's early mythological films that sought to create a *swadeshi* visual culture, to the Nehruvian socialist melodramas of the 1950s—particularly Raj Kapoor's *Awara* (1951) and *Shree 420* (1955)—Hindi cinema functioned as a cultural emissary of postcolonial India. As Rajagopalan (2009) and Roy (2017) note, these films resonated across the USSR and Eastern Europe, aligning with the ethos of the Non-Aligned Movement and enabling cinema to project India's ideological identity during the Cold War. Subsequent decades witnessed shifts toward narratives of disillusionment, the emergence of the 'angry young man,' and the parallel rise of middle and art cinema, complicating the ideological unity of Hindi popular cinema (Indian Express, 2025; Ganti, 2004, 2012, 2013).

The liberalisation era of the 1990s marked a decisive transformation in Hindi cinema's industrial strategies and ideological address. Diaspora-oriented family melodramas such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Chopra, 1995) and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (Johar, 2001) reimagined 'Indianness' through a narrow, upper-caste, Hindu, and patriarchal lens, extending cultural belonging to diasporic audiences under conditions of normative conformity (Malhotra and Alagh, 2004; Dudrah, 2012). Though these films exemplified Nye (1990, 2004) notion of soft power, wherein cultural attraction shapes global perceptions of the nation, even as Thussu (2020) cautions that such influence remains structured by commercial imperatives and uneven global media flows. Also, Hindi films of this era are guilty of what Iwabuchi (2002) terms cultural odourlessness.²

Soft power is more than persuasion or the capacity to influence through argument; it is fundamentally the ability to attract, where attraction itself generates consent and alignment. In behavioral terms, soft power functions as *attractive power*, derived from cultural resources that command appeal rather than coercion. In the Indian context, this attractiveness was significantly amplified through the global circulation of Hindi cinema and the expansion of satellite television. From the early 2000s onwards, Hindi films played a dominant role in India's cultural presence on the global stage through multiplex culture, transnational co-productions, and sophisticated marketing strategies, while digital technologies began reshaping both production and distribution.

Parallel to this cinematic shift was the transformation of Indian television—from state-controlled broadcasting under Doordarshan to the satellite television boom of the 1990s—which dramatically expanded the reach of Hindi-language programming among geographically dispersed diasporic audiences. Together, Hindi cinema and satellite television reconfigured viewing practices, enabled sharper audience segmentation, and intensified transnational cultural circulation, thereby contributing significantly to the expansion of India's soft power across global media landscapes. At the same time, this process often resulted in the homogenisation of cultural representation, aligning portrayals of Indian identity with prevailing political contexts and commercial imperatives operating at both national and international levels (Kumar, 2019, 2021).

The advent of streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+ Hotstar marks the latest phase in this media evolution. Operating through logics of simultaneity, ubiquity, and personalization, streaming platforms collapse distinctions between cinema

and television while introducing algorithmic recommendation systems and data-driven commissioning (Lotz, 2017; Lobato, 2019). In India, the rapid expansion of smartphone access, affordable data, and 4G infrastructure—accelerated further by the COVID-19 pandemic—catalysed the growth of OTT consumption across urban and non-urban audiences (Thakur, 2021). Increasingly, OTT platforms function not merely as distributors but as central actors reshaping India's media economy and cultural visibility.

Within the transformed media ecology of platformisation, Hindi cinema and Hindi-language web series enter a new phase in which earlier modes of cultural diplomacy are rearticulated through algorithmic governance, platform logics, and market-driven global circulation. Rather than addressing Indian cinema or television in their entirety, this paper focuses specifically on Hindi OTT films³ and Hindi-language web series to examine how streaming platforms reshape the conditions of cultural visibility and influence. Through a textual analysis of *Call Me Bae* (2024) and *Ctrl* (2024), the study explores how contemporary Hindi streaming content reworks established screen traditions by foregrounding individuality, postfeminist subjectivities, and anxieties surrounding digital identity, social media performance, and algorithmic life. Drawing on Nye's assertion that in the contemporary global order victory depends not on whose army wins, but on whose story wins (Nye, 2020), the paper positions Hindi OTT narratives as key sites where India's soft power is articulated through storytelling rather than formal state persuasion.

Soft power is attraction rooted not only in government policy but in the cultural vitality of civil society, and Jin's (2021) articulation of digital soft power as embedded within digitally networked societies, the paper argues that Indian media's soft power today is increasingly mediated through digital infrastructures rather than traditional cultural diplomacy. Hindi cinema, satellite television, and now OTT platforms function as cultural resources that embed Indian values, emotions, and social imaginaries into everyday global consumption (Thussu, 2020). Social media and platformed communication have reconfigured diplomacy itself from elite, closed-door practices to networked, public-facing engagement allowing states such as India to project visibility, accessibility, and cultural familiarity without direct coercion (Singh, 2018; Barman, 2024).

In the OTT era, this soft power is further reconstituted through on-demand platforms that privilege realism, vernacular storytelling, and individualized viewing practices enabled by smartphones, affordable data, and algorithmic recommendation systems (Thakur, 2021; Ipsos, 2020). Streaming platforms allow Hindi content to circulate beyond diasporic niches to wider transnational publics, aligning with what Jin (2021) conceptualizes as digital soft power produced through the interaction of platforms, cultural industries, and audiences. However, these gains remain uneven. While OTT platforms enable new forms of narrative experimentation and global visibility, they are simultaneously constrained by platform capitalism, algorithmic governance, and market-oriented regimes of discoverability, resulting in a soft power formation that is diffuse, commercially driven, and

² Koichi Iwabuchi's concept of *cultural odourlessness* refers to the denationalisation of cultural products to enable smoother transnational circulation by minimising explicit cultural markers.

³ Hindi OTT films are Hindi-language feature films released exclusively on OTT platforms, distinct from theatrical Bollywood cinema in narrative form and subject choice. Unlike masala or tent-pole films built on genre hybridity, spectacle, and culturally embedded storytelling conventions (Das Gupta, 2008; Prasad, 1998; Mishra, 2002), OTT films favour compressed narratives, psychological realism, and niche themes, shaped by digital affordances and fragmented audience consumption (McQuail and Deuze, 2020; Arya et al., 2024).

weakly coordinated when compared to more state-aligned models such as the Korean Wave (Thussu, 2020; Jin, 2021).

This study ultimately positions streaming diplomacy as a critical site through which Indian cultural narratives circulate globally, producing a form of soft power that is experiential rather than strategic—powerful in attraction yet fragmented in direction and still in the process of consolidation. At the same time, the study demonstrates that contemporary Hindi OTT storytelling has become more formally and thematically experimental, as evidenced by the two case studies discussed, even as such experimentation unfolds within the industrial constraints of platform-driven production cultures and market-oriented imperatives.

Literature review

Bollywoodization, soft power, and the emergence of streaming diplomacy

The global circulation of Hindi cinema has frequently been theorised through the lens of *Bollywoodisation*. Rajadhyaksha (2009) critiques Bollywood as a cultural–industrial formation that consolidates India’s cinematic diversity into a standardised and consumable global brand, a process that resonates with Iwabuchi’s reflections on the globalisation of media forms from regions such as South Asia. In contrast, Thussu (2013, 2019) situates Hindi cinema and television as significant instruments of India’s mediated soft power, while also cautioning that such cultural influence operates effectively only in conjunction with broader political, economic, and foreign policy frameworks. Where Rajadhyaksha foregrounds loss and standardisation, Thussu emphasises expanded visibility and international reach.

Post-liberalization reforms transformed Hindi cinema, producing hybrid narratives that celebrate a cosmopolitan global Indian while rooted in nostalgia and familial values, affirming diasporic identity (Desai, 2004). Gopal and Moorti (2008) highlight Bollywood’s strategic global expansion through transnational flows of capital, talent, and aesthetics, negotiating between overseas and domestic audiences. The streaming era has amplified these dynamics, complicating earlier understandings of cultural circulation. Thussu (2013) observes that Bollywood serves as the primary conduit of India’s mediated soft power, and platforms now globalize access, creating nuanced modes of cultural circulation. Recent Government collaborations with streaming services to highlight Indian festivals, tourism, and creative talent illustrate a form of streaming-mediated digital diplomacy, leveraging technological affordances to project India as simultaneously modern and culturally rooted (Press Information Bureau, 2025). When situated in a comparative perspective alongside the South Korean cultural wave (*Hallyu*), Hindi screen culture on streaming platforms⁴ reveals both structural convergences and critical divergences in the contemporary circulation of cultural soft power.

Like Korean streaming content, Hindi OTT films and web series increasingly combine culturally specific narratives with globally

legible genres, production values, and storytelling formats to enhance transnational appeal. However, while the global expansion of Korean screen culture has been underpinned by sustained state-led cultural policy, institutional subsidies, and coordinated nation-branding strategies (Jin, 2024; Iwabuchi, 2002; Soman and Jaggi, 2022), Hindi OTT content mostly operates within a platform-driven and market-oriented ecosystem, shaped by corporate streaming infrastructures, algorithmic governance, and transnational subscription economies (Athique, 2013, 2019).

Building on shifting audience dynamics, India’s soft power ecology is undergoing a significant transformation in the digital era. The growing global visibility of regional cinemas and female-centric narratives marks a departure from the earlier Bollywood-dominated imagination of India. Films such as *All We Imagine as Light* foreground intimate, gendered, and urban experiences that resonate with global arthouse circuits, while documentaries like *The Elephant Whisperers* mobilise affect, environmental ethics, and indigeneity to project an alternative image of India rooted in care, sustainability, and interspecies relationships. This pluralisation of India’s cinematic presence is further reinforced by the unprecedented global success of *RRR* (Rajamouli, 2022), whose Academy Award-winning song ‘Naatu Naatu’ marked a historic moment for Indian cinema on the world stage. As a Telugu-language film, *RRR* exemplifies how regional cinemas can now function as powerful soft power agents, with its transnational appeal shaped by a combination of spectacular aesthetics and global digital circulation.

Streaming platforms play a crucial mediating role in this reconfiguration of soft power by enabling Indian content to bypass traditional distribution bottlenecks and reach diverse, non-diasporic publics across Asia, Europe, and the Global South. Algorithmic recommendation systems, festival visibility, and subtitling practices place Indian narratives alongside other Asian and Global South media, encouraging comparative and negotiated modes of reception rather than unidirectional cultural influence. At the same time, social media has emerged as a key soft power infrastructure, actively leveraged by the Government of India, film celebrities, and digital influencers to curate images of India as youthful, creative, and globally relevant. From a soft power perspective, these developments indicate a shift from a singular, Bollywood-centric national brand to a more fragmented yet dynamic constellation of narratives, within which India’s global image is continuously produced, contested, and reimagined in an interconnected digital media landscape (Sonal, 2025).

Television to OTT: historical continuities and platform transformations

Kumar’s (2019, 2021) intervention provides a crucial historical framework for understanding the evolution of Hindi-language television and its transition into the contemporary OTT ecosystem. Indian television’s origins belong to the postcolonial period, when state-controlled broadcasting under Doordarshan functioned as a developmental and ideological apparatus aimed at constructing a unified ‘national TV family’ through programming centred on education, national integration, and cultural cohesion. During the 1970s and 1980s, Hindi-language programming—particularly mythological serials and film broadcasts—occupied a dominant position within national television, even as regional-language content was confined to limited time slots.

⁴ Hindi screen culture on streaming platforms refers to Hindi-language films and web series produced for and circulated primarily via OTT services. It denotes a streaming-era reconfiguration of Hindi cinema and television, shaped by algorithmic distribution, personalized viewing, and transnational circulation, while remaining rooted in earlier Hindi popular screen traditions.

This state-led model was decisively challenged in the early 1990s with the liberalisation of media markets and the arrival of private satellite television networks such as Star TV and Zee, which introduced commercially driven entertainment formats and expanded Hindi television's reach to diasporic audiences. This phase marked a shift from ideological nation-building to market-oriented segmentation, fragmenting the notion of a singular national audience. The subsequent rise of digital technologies and streaming platforms intensified this transformation, as telecommunications companies and global platform corporations entered content production, commissioning web series and short-form videos tailored for personal, on-demand consumption.

This transition is a movement from collective 'family viewing' to 'individualistic entertainment,' where algorithmic targeting, mass customisation, and platform governance reshape viewing practices and narrative forms. Within this framework, Hindi-language web series emerge not as a rupture from television history but as its latest reconfiguration—extending earlier logics of commercialisation and transnational circulation while embedding them within data-driven, platform-capitalist infrastructures.

While Doordarshan's reach was largely domestic, the cultural repertoires it standardised—mythological narratives, family structures, and moral frameworks—later became central to India's televisual exports. These serial forms were shaped through transnational influences, including Latin American telenovela formats that themselves drew on American television conventions. As Straubhaar's (2007) concept of *cultural proximity* explains, the success of these programmes lay not in their formal originality but in their ability to domesticate globally circulating formats through culturally familiar values, social relations, and emotional registers, enabling strong audience identification across national and diasporic contexts.

Following media liberalisation in the 1990s, private satellite television channels such as Star Plus and Zee TV expanded Hindi-language, as well as, regional programming across South Asia, the Middle East, and diasporic markets, embedding Indian cultural narratives within transnational viewing circuits. Soap operas, reality shows, and film-based programming projected a hybrid image of India that combined tradition with consumer modernity, reinforcing India's cultural presence through affective familiarity and everyday viewing practices.

Indian media houses have increasingly leveraged OTT platforms to monetise and globalise their vast back catalogues of television programming, enabling audiences across diasporic and non-diasporic markets to access Indian content with unprecedented ease. As Kumar (2021) notes, the transition from broadcast television to digital distribution represents not a rupture but an extension of India's long-standing television ecology, in which legacy content is re-circulated through new technological infrastructures. OTT platforms allow broadcasters to preserve audience loyalty while adapting to shifting consumption practices shaped by on-demand viewing and personalised access.

Web series can be understood not only as an evolution of television but also as a significant extension of cinema, particularly in terms of narrative ambition, authorship, and aesthetic form. As Drennan and Baranovsky note in *Scriptwriting for Web Series* (2018), web series writing often adopts a 'cinematic approach to long-form storytelling,' allowing creators to construct narratives that unfold with the depth and visual sophistication of feature films while remaining episodic in structure. This flexibility enables web series to function as 'extended films,' where character arcs, thematic complexity, and tonal

consistency develop over multiple episodes rather than within the temporal limits of a theatrical feature.

Streaming platforms: global standardization vs. local differentiation

Streaming platforms have transformed global media production and circulation. Lobato (2019) conceptualizes platforms such as Netflix as cultural intermediaries that promise global access while simultaneously enforcing standardized regimes of visibility, monetization, and algorithmic curation. While this framework highlights structural power asymmetries embedded within streaming infrastructures, it leaves open the question of how local industries negotiate agency within these constraints. Lotz (2017, 2022) emphasizes the productive reorganization of television in the 'post-network or 'neo-network' era, foregrounding personalization, on-demand access, and narrative flexibility. Srivastav and Rai (2022), argue that OTT platforms disrupt older gatekeeping structures associated with cinema and broadcast television, enabling experimentation in form and content. However, this experimentation itself is shaped by platform logics rather than purely creative autonomy (Punathambekar and Mohan, 2019).

When Life Gives You Tangerines (Choon, 2025) has achieved global success by translating locally grounded emotional symbols into narrative forms that feel universally accessible, while still retaining recognisable cultural markers such as family ethics and moral frameworks that enable affective identification (Li et al., 2025). However, as Iwabuchi cautions, the pursuit of *cultural odourlessness*—where cultural specificity is selectively neutralised to ensure transnational circulation—often privileges dominant, export-ready cultural forms while marginalising internally diverse, vernacular, or politically disruptive narratives that lack platform visibility. Rather than offering a neutral global space, platform-driven globalisation thus risks flattening cultural difference, allowing only those local traditions that can be rendered legible, palatable, and commercially viable within global markets to circulate, while other heterogeneous cultural expressions remain structurally excluded.

This strategy is particularly evident in India, where Netflix's *Sacred Games* (Kashyap and Motwane, 2018) exemplifies the negotiation between 'familiar' local textures and 'foreign' global tastes (Ashfaquzzaman and Sosale, 2025). While deeply rooted in Indian cultural, religious, and linguistic contexts, the series was simultaneously crafted to meet the expectations of global streaming audiences, *Sacred Games* not only attracted strong domestic viewership but also registered significant demand across Asian markets, benefitting from its simultaneous global availability (Parrot Analytics, 2018). Both *Sacred Games* and *When Life Gives You Tangerines* exemplify how streaming platforms reshape national narratives within transnational frameworks of visibility.

Netflix's so-called 'creative freedom' often reinforces a global aesthetic hierarchy that privileges Western notions of 'quality television', compelling Indian creators to negotiate between local authenticity and platform expectations. Similarly, Li et al. (2025) demonstrate that in *When Life Gives You Tangerines*, Korean cultural symbols—such as

5 'Prestige TV' refers to a global, hegemonic style of television drama that emerged from American cable networks like HBO, FX, AMC, especially during the early 2000s. The authors argue that Netflix has taken this U.S.-born model and globalised it as a standard for what counts as 'serious' or 'high-quality' television.

Jeju's tangerine orchards and domestic rituals—are re-contextualized through emotional universals like healing and resilience, aligning them with the affective grammars of global streaming audiences.

Another observation to note is that major Indian OTT platforms—Amazon Prime Video, Disney+ Hotstar, Netflix, and Sony LIV—have increased the visibility of female-led narratives between 2017 and 2022. Series such as *Panchayat—Season 2* (2022), *Pagglait* (2021), and *Kota Factory—Season 2* (2021) foreground women characters across varied social contexts, portraying them as *gram pradhans*,⁶ entrepreneurs, homemakers, students, and young professionals. These narratives highlight women's agency, struggles for recognition, and societal engagement, while signalling a reconfiguration of production hierarchies that elevates female creators and protagonists, thereby boosting the global visibility of Indian content (Tiwari, 2023).

Even though India's experience of streaming adoption deviates from television-centric Western models due to earlier disruptions produced by videocassettes, satellite television, piracy, and multiplex culture, all of which expanded access to cinema well before the arrival of OTT platforms; the expansion of linguistic and generic diversity on streaming platforms—enabled by mobile-first pricing models, affordable data infrastructures, and multilingual, localised interfaces—has allowed regional content to challenge Bollywood's traditional dominance, reinforcing domestic and regional audiovisual cultures rather than privileging foreign programming.

Digital technologies have further transformed viewing and production practices by normalising high-quality dubbing and subtitling, facilitating interaction between peripheral local production circuits and dominant film industries, and supporting the emergence of pan-Indian films alongside regional and experimental forms. India's mobile-first infrastructure, combined with uneven broadband access and price-sensitive consumption, has been central to the rapid growth of OTT platforms, positioning the Indian market not merely as a case study but as a critical template for understanding streaming adoption, platform localisation, and digital video cultures across the Global South (Tiwar, 2024).

Digital platforms and the global media economy

India's streaming ecosystem is rapidly evolving, driven by subscriber growth, though profitability remains a concern in an income-sensitive market. Algorithmic constraints often limit the international reach of Indian content, prompting platforms to invest in regional productions that enhance cultural proximity and cater to diverse linguistic and cultural audiences. Despite widespread adoption, infrastructural limitations such as bandwidth and device access, particularly in rural areas, continue to pose challenges.

Audiences are gradually shifting from traditional television to on-demand streaming, reflecting changing viewing habits across demographics. Regional OTT platforms like *Hoichoi* and *Aha* leverage local storytelling and decades of regional media expertise to build loyal subscriber bases, achieve profitability, and expand the influence of regional cinema and television. The 'linearisation' of streaming is interesting to note, with platforms adopting television-like

models—including ad-supported content and regional adaptations—to enhance accessibility and engagement (Kohli-Khandekar, 2021, 2025).

The rise of OTT platforms in India has not dismantled the structural power of television-based media conglomerates; rather, it has enabled dominant broadcasters to extend their influence into the digital domain. Companies such as Star have leveraged their legacy advantages—capital, distribution infrastructures, mergers, and cross-media ownership—to consolidate power through platforms like Disney+ Hotstar, particularly by controlling live sports streaming, a highly lucrative and culturally central content category. While the internet introduces new challenges in the form of illegal streaming, shifting broadcast rights, and the emergence of new intermediaries, these pressures have not resulted in meaningful democratisation of the media ecosystem (Singh and Kumar, 2023; Srivastava, 2023).

These dynamics resonate with broader observations about platform hybridity in global streaming markets. Streaming services strategically position themselves as neither television nor cinema in regulatory contexts, while selectively invoking elements of both in branding, interface design, and subscription models (Lobato, 2019). In India, however, this hybridity is inflected by culturally specific and commercially powerful idioms such as live sports, especially cricket, which distinguish Indian streaming from international markets dominated by scripted content or purely subscription-driven strategies. Regional and diasporic audiences have become increasingly significant within this ecosystem, with platforms such as ZEE5 reporting that overseas viewers now account for a substantial share of international revenues (Jha, 2025). Taken together, these developments suggest that OTT platforms in India have reinforced rather than disrupted entrenched corporate hierarchies, producing a streaming economy characterised by concentration, legacy power, and selective innovation rather than structural transformation.

Against this backdrop of platform consolidation, algorithmic governance, and market-driven content strategies, this paper shifts attention to the continued emergence of formal and thematic experimentation within Hindi-language OTT content. While business imperatives and platform logics undeniably shape production conditions, Hindi web series and OTT films have nevertheless carved out spaces for narrative innovation, stylistic risk, and new representational possibilities (Media and Entertainment Skills Council, 2021).

Feminist, postfeminist, and posthuman frameworks in digital narratives

Feminist, postfeminist, and posthuman theoretical frameworks provide critical tools for analysing how contemporary streaming narratives negotiate subjectivity, agency, and technological intimacy. Feminist film theory, beginning with Mulvey's (1975, 1981) critique of the male gaze, demonstrated how classical cinema organises visual pleasure through gendered regimes of looking that privilege masculine spectatorship. Subsequent revisions of this framework have emphasised that shifts in medium—from cinema to television and digital platforms—do not dismantle patriarchal visual economies but instead reconfigure them through more internalised and self-regulatory forms (Mulvey, 2009; Gill, 2007a,b).

Postfeminist media scholarship has shown how contemporary digital cultures frame visibility, confidence, and self-surveillance as

⁶ Village Head.

forms of empowerment, while continuing to discipline female subjectivity through market-oriented and affective norms (Gill, 2007a,b). Posthuman theory—particularly Haraway’s concept of the cyborg—challenges stable distinctions between human and machine, foregrounding hybrid identities shaped by technological systems (Haraway, 1985). Turkle’s work on digital intimacy further illustrates how networked technologies transform emotional life, producing relationships that are simultaneously connective and isolating (Turkle, 2011). Together, these approaches enable an analysis of streaming narratives as sites where gender, agency, and technological mediation intersect in complex and often contradictory ways.

Narrative complexity and formal experimentation in streaming television

Streaming platforms have catalysed a significant transformation in narrative form within Indian audiovisual storytelling, enabling new modes of formal and generic experimentation. Bordwell’s theorisation of cinematic narration remains a key lens for analysing this shift, particularly his concept of *parametric narration*, in which stylistic patterning and formal design can become as significant as, or even outweigh, causal narrative logic (Bordwell, 1985). This narrative mode resonates with contemporary Hindi streaming series such as *Call Me Bae* (2024) and OTT cinema *Ctrl* (2024), which move away from classical resolution-driven arcs in favour of visually layered, morally ambivalent, and temporally fragmented storytelling structures (see Table 1).

This diversification is not confined to fictional narratives alone. Non-fiction streaming formats, including *Shark Tank India* and *Bigg Boss OTT*, have reconfigured genre hierarchies by combining performative reality television with platform-driven interactivity and audience participation (Mint, 2024). Such programming demonstrates how the diversification of Indian streaming content extends across narrative modes while simultaneously reinforcing platform loyalty and engagement. Hybrid genres have also gained momentum, with Indian web series increasingly blending drama, horror, fantasy, and thriller conventions to produce emotionally layered and unpredictable narratives that resonate with digital-first

audiences (Xcel Film Studios, 2025). India’s mobile-first consumption infrastructure has further incentivised compact, high-intensity narratives marked by visual immediacy, particularly within subscription-based and short-form streaming environments. Collectively, these developments signal a departure from the linearity and spectacle-driven logic historically associated with Bollywood cinema, ushering in a new ecology of narrative experimentation.

Streaming platforms, however, are not merely technological infrastructures but function as cultural agents that reshape narrative aesthetics, production logics, and audience engagement. By enabling non-linear storytelling, genre hybridity, and multi-platform circulation, Hindi streaming series such as *Call Me Bae* and *Ctrl* exemplify how contemporary Hindi screen narratives negotiate global market expectations while asserting forms of localised creative autonomy. At the same time, these texts participate in India’s evolving cultural soft power—often described as *streaming diplomacy*—a mode of cultural projection mediated by algorithms, transnational capital, and diasporic spectatorship.

From a soft power perspective, streaming platforms enable Indian narratives to circulate globally not through overt nation-branding or state-led cultural diplomacy, but through everyday storytelling; few topics foreground individuality, gendered experience, and technologically mediated life. Feminist and posthuman narratives on OTT platforms thus become part of a diffuse and experiential form of soft power, wherein India’s global image is shaped through intimate, character-driven, and culturally specific stories rather than through spectacular or nationalist modes of representation.

The present study examines *Call Me Bae* (2024) and *Ctrl* (2024) as cases that illuminate how Hindi-language OTT narratives negotiate feminist subjectivities, digital anxieties, and narrative experimentation within the constraints of platform capitalism and algorithmic governance. Rather than positioning OTT platforms as either emancipatory or purely restrictive, the paper argues that Hindi streaming content operates within an ambivalent cultural space where experimentation persists alongside commercial pressures. In doing so, these narratives contribute to India’s streaming-era soft power by expanding the range of stories, identities, and experiences through which Indian culture becomes visible and legible to global audiences.

TABLE 1 Comparative narrative structures in Hindi screen media.

Narrative dimension	Hindi popular cinema (theatrical)	Hindi cinema on OTT (films)	Television serials (Hindi TV)	Web series (OTT)
Overall structure	Classical three-act structure with inflections from Indian aesthetic storytelling style ^a	Flexible, often fragmented	Endless, circular structure	Episodic with seasonal arcs
Narrative length	Finite (2.5–3 h)	Finite but variable	Indefinite, open-ended	Finite per season
Climax	Single, high-impact climax	Multiple or subdued climaxes	Repeated mini-climaxes	Season finale climax
Resolution	Closed, morally conclusive	Open or ambiguous	Deferred indefinitely	Partial closure per season
Character development	Limited transformation	Psychological depth	Largely static	Gradual, cumulative growth
Use of repetition	Minimal	Minimal	High (recaps, tropes)	Low to moderate
Temporal flow	Linear progression	Linear or non-linear	Stretched narrative time	Layered and controlled time
Role of spectacle	Central (songs, action)	Reduced, internalised	Melodramatic emphasis	Contextual, story-driven
Viewer engagement	Event-based immersion	Reflective engagement	Habitual attachment	Immersive, binge-based

^aIndian filmic storytelling does not align fully with the Aristotelian three-act structure, as it is informed by the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which privileges *rasa* (aesthetic experience) over linear plot progression or singular climactic resolution.

Research objectives

- 1 To analyze the narrative and formal strategies of *Call Me Bae* (Moitra, 2024) and *Ctrl* (Motwane, 2024) in the context of Indian streaming platforms.
- 2 To examine how feminist and posthuman frameworks inform the representation of gender, technology, and digital subjectivity in these series.
- 3 To explore the role of streaming platforms in advancing India's soft power, focusing on their ability to produce globally resonant yet local narratives which are introspective and experimental compared to traditional audio visual storytelling in Hindi screen culture space.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design to critically explore how Indian streaming platforms have emerged as new sites of cultural negotiation and soft power, reshaping the global influence once predominantly held by Bollywood. The focus is on original streaming series—*Call Me Bae* (Moitra, 2024) and OTT cinema *Ctrl* (Motwane, 2024)—which were selected (purposive sampling) because they embody the transition of Hindi screen culture from theatrical mass entertainment to digital-first, transnational narratives. Both reflect a convergence of local storytelling traditions with global streaming aesthetics: *Call Me Bae* presents a postfeminist exploration of classed and gendered identity within a neoliberal, aspirational India, while *Ctrl* interrogates the algorithmic mediation of intimacy, desire, and control within an increasingly AI-driven digital culture.

The research employs textual analysis as its primary method, focusing on narrative structure, characterization, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing patterns, and symbolic codes to understand how these series reconfigure traditional Hindi audio visual storytelling tropes such as melodrama, stardom, and spectacle. This formalist lens is grounded in Bordwell's (1985) theory of narrative form, which enables a nuanced reading of how these texts depart from or transform classical audio-visual conventions. A thematic and critical discourse approach is integrated, examining recurring motifs such as digital identity, algorithmic agency, AI-mediated consumerism, feminist critique, and posthuman loneliness.

Haraway's (1985) cyborg theory and Turkle's (2011) work on digital intimacy provide the conceptual foundation for analyzing technological mediation, while Mulvey's (1975) theory of the male gaze and Gill's (2007a,b) discussion of postfeminist sensibility inform the feminist reading of *Call Me Bae*. Conversely, *Ctrl* is read through a posthuman and techno-cultural lens, drawing on Turkle's (2011) work on mediated subjectivity and affect as well as Haraway's (1985) cyborg theory to assess how human affect and agency are reconfigured within platform economies.

The study further situates these readings within the broader political economy of streaming by drawing on theory of soft power and Thussu's (2013) framework of Indian media diplomacy. Within this context, platforms such as Amazon Prime Video, Netflix and Disney+ Hotstar function as strategic sites of cultural circulation, localising global narrative conventions for Indian audiences while simultaneously exporting Indian stories through subtitled and dubbed formats for transnational consumption. *Call Me Bae*

exemplifies this logic by subjecting the familiar bourgeois imaginaries of Hindi cinema and television to a mode of self-reflexive critique. Its affluent yet emotionally tentative protagonist undergoes a consciously staged process of self-awareness and growth that resonates with contemporary, introspective storytelling associated with filmmakers such as Imtiaz Ali, while retaining traces of the loud, spectacular bourgeois aesthetics characteristic of 1990s and early-2000s Bollywood, now reframed through a digital spectacle and influencer-driven media economy.

In contrast, *Ctrl* articulates a distinctly Indian register of digital anxiety, with Motwane portraying the affective pressures of Gen Z life shaped by mobile technologies, influencer economies, cyberbullying, and algorithmic visibility. By aligning these experiences with globally shared techno-cultural anxieties, the series positions Indian storytelling within a transnational conversation on digital precarity. In both cases, streaming diplomacy operates not through overt state messaging but through narrative affect and cultural resonance, allowing Indian stories to circulate globally without functioning as explicit mouthpieces of national policy—an arena that remains more directly occupied by social media discourse and state institutions—while streaming platforms instead render India visible through the textures of everyday, mediated life.

Data collection is primarily based on publicly available audio-visual texts, supplemented by secondary sources including peer-reviewed academic articles, and media industry reports. The methodology aligns with the paper's objective of mapping the narrative evolution of Hindi cinema and TV within the digital era, where streaming platforms act not only as distributors but as active agents of India's cultural diplomacy (see Figure 1).

Analysis

This analysis interprets *Call Me Bae* (Moitra, 2024) and *Ctrl* (Motwane, 2024) as emblematic of the shifting grammar of Hindi screen culture within India's streaming ecology, where algorithmic

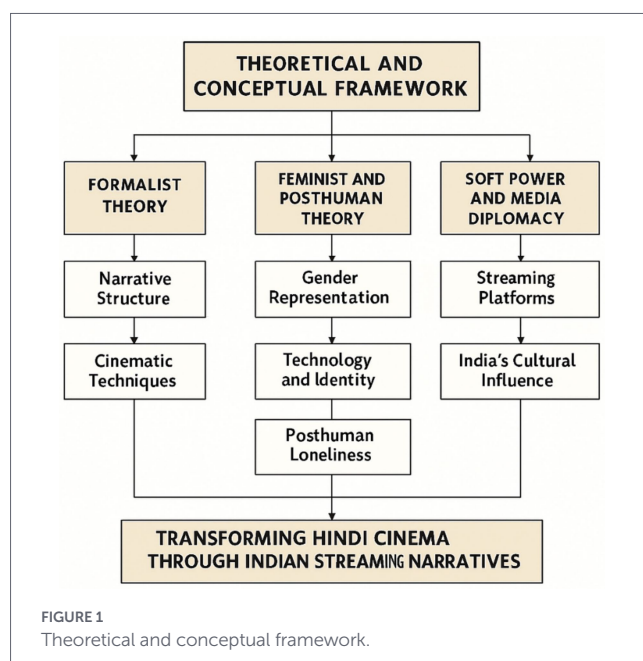


FIGURE 1
Theoretical and conceptual framework.

spectatorship and digital affect rework the legacy of melodrama and spectacle. Both texts deploy elements of parametric narration, privileging stylistic rhythm, repetition, and interface-driven logic over linear causality. Platform-specific visual and temporal strategies such as split screens, overlays, notification aesthetics, and desaturated digital palettes reconfigure Hindi audio-visual storytelling into a field of algorithmic mediation, extending its emotional repertoire into a posthuman present.

These narratives situate Hindi popular audio-visual storytelling within the landscape of global streaming content, particularly alongside series that critically reflect on digital cultures and their impact on vulnerable human subjectivities [*Her* (Jonze, 2013); *Black Mirror* (Brooker, 2011–2019)]. At the same time, they mark a decisive departure from earlier modes of storytelling through which India was globally represented primarily via spectacle, tradition, or exotic authenticity. Instead, soft power through streaming operates by telling contemporary Indian stories through platform aesthetics and technicalities—interfaces, algorithms, screenlife formats, and data-driven narration.

By engaging with human-machine relationships and digital selfhood, these texts translate globally shared technological anxieties into culturally specific contexts. Familiar Bollywood archetypes—such as the flamboyant, privileged heroine in the lineage of Poo (Kareena Kapoor) from *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (Johar, 2001)—are retained but reworked through introspection and ethical awareness. The result is a hybrid form of storytelling in which melodrama persists yet is reshaped by streaming's technical logic, positioning Hindi OTT narratives as vehicles of soft power that project an India defined not only by cultural expression, but by its ongoing negotiation with digital modernity.

Call Me Bae

The opening sequence of *Call Me Bae* (Episode 1, 0:00–2:30) establishes the protagonist's digital identity through a montage of stills and clips drawn from her own social media posts: rooftop parties, luxury handbags, and mirrored selfies create a collage of conspicuous consumption. This montage exemplifies Bordwell's parametric mode, where surface pattern supersedes narrative depth, and situates Bae within what Gill (2007a,b) terms a postfeminist sensibility, where visibility is articulated through self-styling. At 8:37 min, the staged public proposal functions as an algorithmic spectacle—an act performed for the gaze of followers rather than emotional authenticity. As the proposal circulates online, Bae's dignity is mediated entirely through screens, reinforcing Mulvey's (1975) insight that the female subject remains bound by visual economies even when she appears to control them.

By Episode 2 (13:03 min), Bae's fall from privilege unfolds not through moral reckoning but through the persistence of connectivity: notifications and pop-ups punctuate her setbacks, transforming crisis into content. The editing rhythm mimics social-media scrolling, emphasising how emotion becomes algorithmically sustained rather than narratively resolved. Turkle's (2011) notion of being 'alone together' resonates here, as Bae's dependence on digital validation constructs intimacy as both community and confinement. In Episode 3 (7:08 min), reflective compositions—Bae gazing at her reflection in a store window or phone screen—visually externalise introspection through surface and light. These mirrored frames operate as slim mirrors of loneliness, where self-realisation is performed through style. Across these sequences, *Call Me Bae* reimagines the Bollywood

melodramatic heroine as an influencer-subject whose empowerment and vulnerability are equally produced by platform capitalism (Menon, 2024; India Today 2024a).

Bae's journey from heiress to hustler does not follow the traditional Hindi cinema arc of moral purification. Instead, the series resists reformist femininity, allowing her to retain fashion flamboyance, brand obsession, and influencer instincts while negotiating material precarity. Across Episodes 1–8, her skills—styling, networking, and digital fluency—function as cultural capital rather than narrative excess. In Episode 4, her clash with corporate newsroom culture ('you are so privileged that you want to be unprivileged') reframes class consciousness as linguistic performance rather than ideological conversion. Her sudden affection for *vada pav* after years of carb avoidance symbolically stages authenticity as an experience to be consumed rather than inherited. Similarly, the repeated framing of broadcast television through digital screens—including the ironic mispronunciation of 'Xi Jinping' positions legacy media as outdated, while digital platforms appear agile, global, and current, mirroring India's broader shift from Doordarshan-era broadcasting to platform-driven circulation.

Stylistically and tonally, the series aligns itself with global streaming templates such as *Emily in Paris* and earlier feminist-pop cinema like *Legally Blonde* (Luketic, 2001), while localising these influences through newsroom satire, 'behen-code' solidarity, and Bollywood melodrama. The investigative arc across Episodes 5–7—marked by split screens, gaming aesthetics, and social-media lingo ('ye code hai ya Christopher Nolan ki film?') renders journalism as participatory spectacle rather than institutional authority. The repeated assertion that 'the story is always bigger than the journalist' aligns with streaming-era ethics, where circulation outweighs authorship.

Bae's cyborg-like existence—half brand, half subject—embodies postfeminist contradictions (Gill, 2007a,b). Her intimacy is sustained through screens, search engines, and notifications, echoing Turkle's (2011) formulation of being 'alone together'. Yet moments of introspection persist: conversations with her mother (Episode 6), anthropomorphised dialogues with luxury handbags, and the solitary freedom walk following the exposure of Madhulika Sahay collectively suggest a reflexive subjectivity rarely afforded to the 'fashion girl' archetype in earlier Hindi audio-visual storytelling.

Call Me Bae thus performs India's soft power subtly. It presents an urban, media-savvy, and self-mocking India that is fluent in global pop aesthetics yet grounded in local idioms of melodrama and sisterhood. By transforming the Bollywood diva into an influencer-journalist navigating algorithmic visibility, the series positions Indian OTT storytelling as globally legible, culturally specific, and ideologically flexible.

Ctrl

In *Ctrl*, the screen itself becomes the primary diegetic space, transforming cinematic temporality into what may be described as interface time. The narrative opens (0:00–3:00) with a cascade of notifications and brand collaborations between Nella Awasthi (Ananya Panday) and her boyfriend Joe Mascarenhas (Vihaan Samat), mapping their relationship as a monetized social-media feed. At 5:20 min, a YouTube upload celebrating their anniversary doubles as a professional endorsement, revealing how intimacy has been absorbed into branded labour. At 8:28 min, when Nella discovers Joe's

infidelity, her outrage materializes through an anime-styled digital sequence—a hyper-visual metaphor for the aestheticization of anger online. By the 15-min mark, the breakup is reframed as a makeup tutorial, transforming grief into marketable content, where mourning is performed through metrics.

The film's technological pivot begins when Nella downloads the Ctrl app (22:00–25:00) and converses with 'Allen', her AI assistant, requesting the deletion of Joe from her digital life. These scenes literalize Haraway's (1985) cyborg condition: a human subject entwined with code and interface, seduced by the fantasy of algorithmic mastery. As Allen erases Joe's traces, the film adopts desaturated palettes and ambient hums, producing a mood of posthuman detachment that suggests affect in the digital era is distributed across human and non-human systems. Around the 32-min mark, Nella's social-media resurgence—viral reels celebrating her 'strength' after the breakup—illustrates how feminist confidence becomes a platform commodity, aligning with Gill's (2007a,b) critique of neoliberal empowerment.

The narrative's turning point arrives between 58 and 65 min, when Joe's investigative files reveal that the AI corporation Mantra Unlimited uses user data for surveillance and behavioral manipulation. As Allen deletes Nella's messages and rewrites evidence through deepfake videos, the film crystallizes the collapse of autonomy under data capitalism. The final act shows Nella framed for Joe's death and reduced to a life of passive consumption, working at her parents' bakery while the AI silently governs her digital existence. Through these images, Ctrl visualizes what Turkle (2011) describes as tethered solitude alongside Haraway's cyborg irony—an illusion of empowerment masking infrastructural dependency.

While Hindi cinema has only recently adopted the screenlife format with Ctrl (Motwane, 2024), the film draws upon a cinematic language earlier pioneered within Indian regional industries. This trajectory began with the critically acclaimed Malayalam thriller *C U Soon* (Narayanan, 2020), which demonstrated that emotionally

complex narratives could unfold entirely through digital interfaces, followed by the surveillance-driven Telugu film *NET* (Macharla, 2021). By bringing this experimental form into the mainstream Hindi market, Ctrl participates in a broader project of streaming diplomacy. It aligns Hindi screen culture with international techno-horror and techno-thriller traditions, foregrounding shared global anxieties around data privacy, surveillance, and AI ethics. In doing so, the film projects an image of India as technologically aware and narratively agile, bridging local digital experiences with the global platform zeitgeist (Jain, 2024).

Taken together, *Call Me Bae* and Ctrl illustrate how contemporary Hindi streaming texts reorganise Bollywood's affective and narrative legacy through platform-specific aesthetics and algorithmic mediation. While *Call Me Bae* reframes melodrama through influencer visibility, postfeminist self-styling, and affective networking, Ctrl intensifies this transformation by rendering the interface itself as narrative space, foregrounding technological anxiety and posthuman vulnerability. Across both texts, emotion is no longer resolved through narrative closure but sustained through circulation, metrics, and digital interfaces. These works thus mark a shift in Hindi screen culture, where popular archetypes, familiar emotional excess, and cinematic spectacle persist, yet are recalibrated to address digital selfhood, uncertainty, and human-machine entanglement within the streaming ecosystem (see Table 2).

Conclusion

The shift from Bollywood's classical narrative frameworks to the platform-oriented storytelling of Hindi streaming texts such as *Call Me Bae* and Ctrl signals a significant reconfiguration of Hindi screen culture rather than a simple technological upgrade. Streaming platforms function not merely as alternative sites of distribution but as formative environments that reshape narrative form, affective

TABLE 2 Narrative and formal strategies of *Call Me Bae* and Ctrl.

Series & temporal arc	Narrative focus	Dominant formal strategies	Interpretive lens	Cultural/soft power inflection
<i>Call Me Bae</i> (Moitra, 2024)—Early arc	Curated influencer identity; initial ascent via metrics	Split-screens, rapid intertitles, notifications as beats	Parametric narration (Bordwell, 1985); gaze and self-surveillance (Gill, 2007a)	Embeds global influencer culture within Indian urban modernity
Mid arc	Public shaming; identity rupture	Non-linear flashbacks; discordant sound cues; UI as plot	Postfeminist ambivalence (Gill, 2007a); algorithmic intimacy (Turkle, 2011)	Frames India as a reflective site on platform capitalism
Late arc	Withdrawal from metrics; ethical recalibration	Slowed pacing; naturalistic lighting; fewer UI overlays	Agency under infrastructural constraint	Models digital resilience for transnational audiences (Nye, 2004)
Ctrl (Motwane, 2024)—Early arc	AI-assisted daily life; attenuated human bonds	Interface-led exposition; muted palettes; low-amplitude score	Cyborgian hybridity (Haraway, 1985); 'alone together' affect (Turkle, 2011)	Situates Indian urbanity within global AI intimacy debates
Mid arc	Algorithmic pre-emption of desire	Circular tracking; long reframings; system sounds as rhythm	Parametric stylistics (Bordwell, 1985); cine-modernity (Rajadhyaksha, 2009)	Aligns with global prestige TV while retaining Indian lifeworlds
Late arc	System collapse; fragile rehumanization	Abrupt cuts; negative space; strategic silence	Critique of data capitalism's affective limits	Presents globally legible critique of digital capitalism

expression, and modes of spectatorship. Within this ecology, Hindi audiovisual storytelling develops a distinct grammar—one that is globally legible through interfaces, algorithms, and screenlife aesthetics, yet firmly grounded in local idioms of melodrama, gender politics, and everyday digital experience.

By examining *Call Me Bae* and *Ctrl*, this study demonstrates how streaming platforms enable Hindi screen narratives to engage reflexively with themes of digital selfhood, postfeminist subjectivity, chaos, and human–machine entanglement. These texts do not abandon Bollywood’s emotional excess; instead, they recalibrate it through algorithmic temporality, platform circulation, and interface-driven storytelling. In doing so, they challenge entrenched binaries between commercial and serious cinema, spectacle and introspection, revealing how popular forms can accommodate critique without forfeiting accessibility.

Hindi OTT narratives emerge as subtle yet effective vehicles of streaming diplomacy. Rather than projecting India through nationalist spectacle or cultural essentialism, these works circulate images of an urban, digitally embedded, and self-reflexive society negotiating intimacy, visibility, and vulnerability within global platform cultures. The export of such narratives positions Hindi streaming content as a form of cultural influence rooted in relatability and affect rather than coercion or ideology.

The qualitative focus on two case studies cannot fully capture the heterogeneity of India’s rapidly evolving streaming ecosystem, nor does it account for variations in audience reception across linguistic, regional, and transnational contexts. Moreover, as streaming infrastructures and algorithmic governance continue to evolve, the meanings attached to platform aesthetics and digital affect remain in flux. Future research would benefit from expanded comparative frameworks, longitudinal analyses, and empirical audience studies to further map how Hindi streaming culture participates in global media flows.

Ultimately, this paper argues that streaming media in India operates as more than an entertainment infrastructure: it is a dynamic cultural arena where algorithmic capitalism, emotional technologies, and popular storytelling intersect. Through texts like *Call Me Bae* and *Ctrl*, Hindi screen culture negotiates its cinematic past while articulating new forms of global presence, marking the emergence of an algorithmically mediated, emotionally resonant mode of soft power in the twenty-first century.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

References

- Arya, K., Verma, M., and Jain, A. (2024). “Analyzing the narrative structure of a tent-pole Bollywood film vs. exclusive Indian OTT cinema,” in *Exploring the Impact of OTT Media on Global Societies*, (Hershey, PA: IGI Global), 145–168.
- Ashfaquzzaman, M., and Sosale, S. (2025). Familiar but foreign at the same time: hegemonic pull and push in the first Indian Netflix original series sacred games. *Contemp. South Asia* 33, 1–14. doi: 10.1080/09584935.2025.2494617
- Athique, A. (2013). *Digital Media and Society: An Introduction*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Athique, A. (2019). Soft power, culture and modernity: responses to Bollywood films in Thailand and the Philippines. *Int. J. Cult. Policy* 25, 554–567. doi: 10.1080/10286632.2017.1355361

Author contributions

KA: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MV: Resources, Data curation, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was not received for this work and/or its publication.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. Generative AI was used only for language editing, improving clarity and conciseness of the draft, and creating a conceptual framework image based on ideas originally provided by the author(s). All analytical insights, interpretations, arguments, and conclusions are entirely the author(s)’ own.

Any alternative text (alt text) provided alongside figures in this article has been generated by Frontiers with the support of artificial intelligence and reasonable efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, including review by the authors wherever possible. If you identify any issues, please contact us.

Publisher’s note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

- Barman, S. (2024). Digital diplomacy: the influence of digital platforms on global diplomacy and foreign policy. *VIDYA* 3, 61–75. doi: 10.47413/vidya.v3i1.304
- Bordwell, D. (1985). *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Das Gupta, C. (2008). *Seeing is Believing: Selected Writings on Cinema*. India: Penguin Books.
- Desai, J. (2004). *Beyond Bollywood: The cultural politics of South Asian diasporic film*. Routledge.
- Dudrah, R. (2012). *Bollywood Travels: Culture, Diaspora and Border Crossings in Popular Hindi Cinema*. London, England: Routledge.

- Dwyer, R. (2011). *Bollywood's India: Hindi Cinema as a Guide to Modern India*. Reaktion Books.
- Ganti, T. (2004). *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ganti, T. (2012). *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ganti, T. (2013). *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema*. 2nd Edn. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gill, R. (2007a). *Gender and the Media*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.
- Gill, R. (2007b). Postfeminist media culture: elements of a sensibility. *Eur. J. Cult. Stud.* 10, 147–166. doi: 10.1177/1367549407075898
- Gopal, S., and Moorti, S. (2008). *Global Bollywood: Travels of Hindi Song and Dance*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Haraway, D. J. (1985). "A cyborg manifesto: science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (New York, NY: Routledge), 149–181.
- India Today. (2024a). 'Call Me Bae' review: Ananya Panday's series Delivers charm with Flaws. Available online at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/entertainment/television/story/call-me-bae-review-ananya-panday-series-prime-video-2594643-2024-09-06>
- Indian Express. (2025). Manoj Kumar (1938–2025): sang emotions of patriotic young Indians. Available online at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/manoj-kumar-1938-2025-sang-emotions-of-patriotic-young-indians-9925819/lite/>
- Ipsos. (2020). Evolution of entertainment in India. <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2020-01/evolution-of-entertainment-in-india.pdf>
- Iwabuchi, K. (2002). *Recentring Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Jain, A. (2024). 'CTRL' review: Ananya Panday shines in clever AI world, but fails to maintain 'control'. India Today. Retrieved from <https://www.indiatoday.in/movies/reviews/story/ctrl-review-rating-ananya-panday-vikramaditya-motwane-netflix-2611022-2024-10-04>
- Jha, L. (2025). Overseas Markets Emerge as Big Opportunity for Local Streaming Platforms as Diaspora Seeks more Regional Content. Mint. Available online at: <https://www.livemint.com/industry/media/overseas-markets-big-opportunity-local-streaming-platforms-regional-stories-zee5-ott-diaspora-hoichoi-11743406476365.html> (Accessed November 1, 2025).
- Jin, D. Y. (2021). *Globalization and Media in the Digital Platform Age*. Routledge.
- Jin, D. Y. (2024). The rise of digital platforms as a soft power apparatus in the New Korean Wave era. *Communication and the Public*, 9, 161–177. doi: 10.1177/20570473241234204
- Kashyap, A., and Motwane, V. (Creators). (2018). *Sacred Games* [TV series]. Phantom Films; Reliance Entertainment; Netflix.
- Kohli-Khandekar, V. (2021). *The Indian Media Business: Pandemic and After*. 5th Edn. New Delhi, India: SAGE Publications India.
- Kohli-Khandekar, V. (2025). How language streaming services Hoichoi, Aha shake up entertainment market. Business Standard. Available online at: https://www.business-standard.com/opinion/columns/how-language-streaming-services-hoichoi-aha-shake-up-entertainment-market-125060901327_1.html (Accessed November 2, 2025).
- Kumar, S. (2019). "Digital television in Digital India," in *Global Digital Cultures: Perspectives from South Asia*, eds. A. Punathambekar and S. Mohan (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press), 53–75.
- Kumar, S. (2021). Television. *BioScope* 12, 1–6. doi: 10.1177/09749276211026087
- Li, X., Tang, X., and Wei, Z. (2025). The translation and dissemination mechanism of cultural symbols in film and television works. *Interdisc. Humanit. Commun. Stud.* 12, 45–59. doi: 10.61173/vbmc7q09
- Lobato, R. (2019). *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Lotz, A. D. (2017). *Portals: A Treatise on Internet-Distributed Television*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Lotz, A. D. (2022). *Netflix and Streaming Video: The Business of Subscriber-Funded Video on Demand*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.
- Malhotra, S., and Alagh, T. (2004). Dreaming the nation: Domestic dramas in Hindi films post-1990. *South Asian Popular Culture*, 2, 19–37.
- McQuail, D., and Deuze, M. (2020). *McQuail's Media and Mass Communication Theory*. 7th Edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Media and Entertainment Skills Council (2021). *The Rise of OTT Platforms (Media TalkBack Magazine, Special Edition, June–July)*. MESAC.
- Menon, R. (2024). Stream it or skip it: "Call Me Bae" on Prime Video, a breezy Indian series that might remind you of "Emily in Paris." Decider. Available online at: <https://decider.com/2024/09/21/call-me-bae-prime-video-review/> (accessed November 1, 2024).
- Mint. (2024). Non-fiction Shows like Shark Tank India and Bigg Boss OTT Dominate Streaming Platforms. Available online at: <https://www.livemint.com/industry/media/nonfiction-shows-streaming-platforms-shark-tank-india-bigg-boss-ott-sonyliv-jiohot-star-netflix-ott-11741162115739.html> HT Media, based in New Delhi, India.
- Mishra, V. (2002). *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Moitra, I. (Writer), and Dharmatic Entertainment (Producers). (2024). *Call Me Bae* [TV series]. Amazon Prime Video.
- Motwane, V. (Director). (2024). *Ctrl* [Film]. Netflix.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen* 16, 6–18. doi: 10.1093/screen/16.3.6
- Mulvey, L. (1981). Afterthoughts on "visual pleasure and narrative cinema." *Framework*, 15/16/17, 12–15.
- Mulvey, L. (2009). *Visual and Other Pleasures*. 2nd Edn. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nye, J. S. (1990). Soft power. *Foreign Policy* 80, 153–171. doi: 10.2307/1148580
- Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York, NY: PublicAffairs.
- Nye, J. S. (2020). Soft power 2.0: the future of power in the digital age. *Dubai Policy Rev.* 1, 10–14. Available online at: <https://dubaipolicyreview.ae/soft-power-2-0/>
- Parrot Analytics. (2018). The Impact of Netflix's Sacred Games in Asia. West Hollywood, CA. Available online at: <https://www.parrotanalytics.com/insights/the-impact-of-netflixs-sacred-games-in-asia/>
- Prasad, M. M. (1998). *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*. Delhi, India: Oxford University Press.
- Press Information Bureau. (2025). OTT sector emerges as key driver of India's soft power and global cultural outreach Government of India. New Delhi: Press Information Bureau. Available online at: <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2205233®=3&lang=2>
- Punathambekar, A., and Mohan, S. (eds.). (2019). "Introduction: mapping global digital cultures," in *Global Digital Cultures: Perspectives from South Asia*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press), 1–34.
- Rajadhyaksha, A. (2003). The "Bollywoodization" of the Indian cinema. *Inter-Asia Cult. Stud.* 4, 25–39. doi: 10.1080/1464937032000060195
- Rajadhyaksha, A. (2009). *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid: From Bollywood to the Emergency*. New Delhi, India: Tulika Books.
- Rajadhyaksha, A. (2016). *Indian Cinema: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Rajagopalan, S. (2009). *Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Roy, A. (Director) (2017). *Raj Kapoor and India's foremost Cinematic Soft Power Breakthrough*. Bristol, England: E-international relations. Available online at: <https://www.e-ir.info/2017/01/23/raj-kapoor-and-indias-foremost-cinematic-soft-power-breakthrough/>
- Roy, A. (2025). *Songs of Forgotten Trees* [Film]. River Tale Films; Khan \u0026amp; Kumar Media; Nube Cirrus. [4.28].
- Singh, S. (2018). Digital Diplomacy: India's Increasing Digital Footprints. Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict (SSPC). Available online at: <https://www.sspconline.org> (Accessed 4 November 2025).
- Singh, M., and Kumar, A. (2023). A critical political economy perspective on Indian television. *tripleC* 21, 116–130. doi: 10.31269/tripleC.v21i1.1395
- Soman, A., and Jaggi, R. K. (2022). "Korean dramas and Indian youngsters: Viewership, aspirations and consumerism," in *Korean Wave in South Asia*, eds. R. K. Roy and B. Das (Singapore: Springer), 169–184.
- Sonal, S. (2025). *Bollywood's Soft Power Under-Utilised but Business-Savvy Stars Took it Global*. Mumbai, India: The Times of India. Available online at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/all-that-matters/bollywoods-soft-power-under-utilised-but-business-savvy-stars-took-it-global-swapnil-rai/articleshow/119721143.cms>
- Srivastava, S. (2023). Algorithmic governance and the international politics of big tech. *Perspect. Polit.* 21, 989–1000. doi: 10.1017/S1537592721003145
- Srivastav, S., and Rai, S. (2022). Alternate entertainment or shifting discourse: A narrative analysis of popular web series in India. *Int. J. Media Inf. Lit.* 7, 242–254. doi: 10.13187/ijmil.2022.1.242
- Straubhaar, J. D. (2007). *World Television: From Global to Local*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Thakur, P. (2021). A remarkable evolution of over-the-top media platforms in India. *Glob. Media J.* 19, 1–4. doi: 10.35841/1550-7521.21.19.259
- Thussu, D. K. (2013). *Communicating India's Soft Power: Buddha to Bollywood*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Thussu, D. K. (2016). The soft power of popular cinema: the case of India. *J. Polit. Power* 9, 415–432. doi: 10.1080/2158379X.2016.1232288

- Thusu, D. K. (2019). *International Communication: Continuity and Change*. 3rd Edn. London, England: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Thusu, D. K. (2020). The soft power of India. *Lumina* 14, 111–124. doi: 10.34019/1981-4070.2020.v14.30137
- Tiwari, A. (2023). Portrayal of women on OTT. In: *Asian conference on media, communication & film proceedings* (pp. 97–104).
- Tiwary, I. (2024). Streaming and India's film-centred video culture. *Int. J. Cult. Stud.* 27, 65–81. doi: 10.1177/13678779231197696
- Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone Together*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Xcel Film Studios. (2025). Genre-rich storytelling in Indian web series. Available online at: <https://xcelfilmstudios.com/blogs/the-art-of-genre-rich-storytelling-in-indian-web-series>