



Discourse Analysis of Female Identity Shaped by International Media through Systematic Functional Linguistics

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Abstract

A correlation between media, gender identity and society is central in this information era. Gender and sexuality has seen a paradigm shift in recent decades, making female representation a subject of several cultural studies. International media contributed to shaping women's identity and impacting social construction. The aim of this study was to analyse the role played by international media organisations like Netflix through the lens of Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL). In order to offer an in-depth analysis of the female identity, the study opted for a qualitative research method using discourse analysis and a systematic literature review to achieve the research objectives. The findings of the study demonstrated that Netflix, as an international media organisation, has been using a biased representation of female characters where the major focus has been led on the overt masculinity of white female characters. The study used contextuality to study two recently released Netflix original series *Sex Education* and *Ginny and Georgia*. Further, to achieve the second objective of the study, semantics analysis was conducted to review the studies published by previous scholars. The findings of the study further demonstrated the stereotypical representation of the female protagonists portrayed by Netflix and other international media organisations. Additionally, the study offered a further analysis of Systematic Functional Linguistics to study the language used for shaping female identity on a global level.

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Introduction

Since globalisation, society has witnessed altering views of female identities through media which includes both positive and negative depictions. If there are portrayals of women excelling in professional fields and those in power, there are also derogatory images and showing prejudices and discrimination. [Byerly and Ross \(2008\)](#) rightly observed that women portrayed through media channels have always endured gender stereotypes, sustaining all sorts of contemporary discourses of women and feminism, launched in specific contexts ([Sobande, Fearfull, & Brownlie, 2020](#)). Owing to these portrayals, female representation in both national and international media has changed considerably.

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As a result, the identity of female character is being shaped by media organisations to create hype within popular culture, particularly showcasing a biased representation of females through international news media. Such portrayals exploit language and its semantics to show a lack of strength and negativity in women (O'Brien, 2019).

Although international media organisations have always helped in bringing to fore the distinct qualities of women in all spheres of life; however, Netflix, which is a highly accepted media organization, has been involved in showing a biased representation of female characters where the major focus is on the overt masculinity of white female characters. Netflix is highly preferred by popular culture and is often used as a catalyst to demonstrate a female identity globally, but it is allegedly conveying more masculinity in females and dominant attitudes and behaviour, which though seems unrealistic. It has portrayed masculinity as a quality to achieve 'power' in a male dominated world. In short, Netflix, like all other international media and top channels, have been responsible for creating a dominant western image of women. A new kind of discourse is created that showers accolades on female identity in its new shape and celebrates their success globally, thus creating a positive image of women in the minds of the masses (Petty & Pope, 2019).

This different popular cultural image of women has been brought into existence with the usage of a definite language which functions within a specific societal setting. International media like the media conglomerate Netflix makes use of a specific language such as systematic functional linguistics (Goixart Serra, 2022), which has the potential to function as a popular cultural language, suiting the needs of popular online television platforms. This made their job easier to disseminate a dominant female identity in their portrayals (Tatsioka, 2022).

There is a dearth of studies to examine whether there are any biased factors in the portrayals of female identity in the international media and to what extent international media is involved in stereotypical representation of female identity (O'Brien, 2019; Petty & Pope, 2019; Sobande et al., 2020). This study fills this research gap with the aim to examine the role of international media organisations like Netflix in defining the female identity and how language was exploited to achieve this purpose. The study also aimed to identify the stereotyped female identity portrayed by international media organisations like Netflix under the effect of semantics and context using Systematic Functional Linguistics. Following this aim, the specific research objectives of the study included (i) to evaluate the biased factors which have been reflected in international media; and (ii) to understand the different attributes which define the stereotypical representation of international media. To achieve these objectives, the following two research questions were framed:

1. What are the biased factors that have been reflected in international media?
2. What attributes define the stereotypical representation of international media?

The study is significant because it is crucial to identify the impacts led by international organisations like Netflix. This study differs from the other studies since it aims to achieve the results using Systematic Functional Linguistics. Furthermore, the study will help future researchers to identify how biased representation and portrayal of stereotypes have impacted the image of female identity.

Conceptual framework

In order to enhance the vitality of the study, it is significant to adopt a certain research philosophy. A research philosophy specifies the set of presumptions that the research is built on, which determines the foundation of the study and further aids in the development of the research. Research philosophy is a set of speculations and views relating to the advancement of knowledge (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, & Bristow, 2019). There are three types of research philosophy- positivism, interpretivism and pragmatism.

In light of the sociocultural backdrop of analysing the international media strategies for defining and shaping female identity, the study used interpretivism as the research philosophy. Alharahsheh and Pius (2020) asserted that "Interpretivism is more concerned with in-depth variables and factors related to a context, it considers humans as different from physical phenomena as they create further depth in meanings with the assumption that human beings cannot be explored in a similar way to physical phenomena." Similarly, the definition of interpretivism by Saunders et al. (2019) proposed a focus on critical realism that aids in understanding the many human experiences from a subjective point of view.

This approach of interpretivism offered a better insight into the role played by international organisations in shaping the female identity within the cultural perspective and how individuals achieved these representations.

Literature Review

- *Media, Gender Identity And Society*

The relationship between media, gender identity and society has been complex to the extent that the core of gender and sexuality changed through the ages (Graff, Kapur, & Walters, 2019). According to Brooks and Hébert (2006), gender is an asocial construct through which a society is defined. Keeping this statement in mind, it needs to be evaluated whether the media effectively shaped gender identity in all social, political, cultural and economic structures (Van der Pas & Aldering, 2020). According to Freeman (2000), the media focused on apparel and feminine image-making as central in representing dimensions of women's experience in informatics that are simultaneously burdensome and pleasurable. Gauntlett (2008) believed that "with the media containing so many images of women and men, and messages about men, women and sexuality today, it is highly unlikely that these ideas would have no impact on our own sense of identity."

International media has long been responsible for shaping female identity from a contemporary perspective or compulsively representing female identity from the western point of view (Luo, 2022). In other words, presentation of post-feminist ideals excessively focuses on the westernised portrayal of women. Although media has been central towards identifying the issues pertinent to defining the presentation of female identity, its depiction of women has always been moulded from the western perspective. The objective, it is argued, that the international media wishes to portray that in order to enhance women's identity. The western identity of female figures proves the most dominant element within media and the social context.

This is one of the reasons why international television series like Baywatch became so popular after it was released in developing countries. A study conducted by Brown (2006), asserted that popular television series like 'Baywatch' affects viewers by enhancing their aggressive behaviour towards sexual behaviour and often results in eating disorders and body dysmorphia. Tuchman (1979) had asserted that mass media offered blatant sexism by presenting women as more politically sophisticated than theoretically sound. Based on this statement, Toffoletti (2017) provided a different perspective on how power dynamics of gender, ethnicity and sexuality influence women's participation in the media. This statement has its limitation, as women's representation has been long shaped within the transnational media organisation.

- *Systematic Functional Linguistics*

Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) represents the language technique through which the female identity has been constructed by the international media. For instance, Netflix uses SFL in order to emphasise how a language system in general can function more than language structure. It is interesting to see the how SFL analyses and evaluates the relationship between language, text and context in the representation of women in several discourses. Besides, from the perspective of critical linguistics, SFL can also highlight female identity from a social context, making the entire subject more closely related to sociology. A study, conducted by Halliday and Matthiessen (2013), asserted that SFL offers a deeper insight into the semantic system of understanding the language used to describe within a social context. Therefore, SFL, from a social contextual point of view, offers a deeper insight into why the glamorised world attracts unhealthy patterns of women's identity, which in turn is used to suffice the commercial need of the audience.

Methodology

- *Research design*

The study used a qualitative research method to analyse the functioning of language, textuality and context through which international media represents female identity. The research approach aids in choosing the overall strategy or method for carrying out the investigation. It provides a strategy and process that includes the stages from general hypotheses to specific methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. According to Kothari (2004), a research approach within qualitative research helps in developing an ideology of subjective assessment of attitudes, opinions and behaviour, which will generate a non-quantitative form of results. Keeping this statement in mind, it can be said that a research approach helps offer an in-depth identification of the problem from a social context (Bandura, 2001). A systematic literature review and discourse analysis was used to assess secondary qualitative data collected for the research to produce actionable results.

There are two types of approaches inductive and deductive to conduct a qualitative research. Hyde (2000) demonstrated that with the observation of specific instances and seeking to establish generalisations,

deductive reasoning commences with generalisations, and seeks to see if these generalisations apply to specific cases. This type of deductive research technique is particularly useful to understand how international media organisations shape female identity under certain themes like female character attributes, values and archetypes. The deductive method starts with a theory and builds the entire evaluation on it. According to Saunders et al. (2019), “Deductive reasoning occurs when the conclusion is derived logically from a set of theory-derived premises, the conclusion being true when all the premises are true.” In light of this assertion, it may be concluded that the deductive approach is the best method for this study.

- *Data Collection*

Both primary and secondary data was collected to carry out this research. Any type of first-hand information and observations are referred to as primary data while secondary data consists of information which has been obtained for a study by another researcher or organisation who has made it accessible for others usage to further the present area of study (Glass, 1976). Primary data was collected directly from two Netflix series- *Sex Education* and *Ginny and Georgia*, aiming to find a reply to the first research question of this study through a discourse analysis. These two-television series were chosen specifically from Netflix which is responsible for building a stereotypical western image of female identity in popular culture. In contrast, the secondary data was collected from published works and film and media archives, to conduct a kind of Systematic Literature Review (SLR). The objective was to find out an answer to the second research question of this study through SLR and determine how global organisations like Netflix have impacted female identity.

- *Data analysis*

The qualitative data is best analysed through a step-by-step research strategy compatible with research objectives. Johannesson and Perjons (2014) rightly stated, “A research strategy guides a researcher in planning, executing, and monitoring the study.” Various types of research strategies are used to analyse the data, such as experimental, action, case study, grounded theory, ethnography and archival research. In order to choose a specific research strategy, it is crucial to identify the problem of the study. In the context of the current study, data was mainly built upon images of female identity designed by international media organisation on Netflix and other OTT platforms. Hence, the most suitable data analysis method was to conduct SFL and analyse the existing texts created by international media organisations like Netflix along with previous studies. Ventresca and Mohr (2017) consider this type of archival or document research as a technique that makes it easier to analyse data obtained from discourses and literature reviews. Therefore, the study used archival or document research analytics as the data analysis method to conduct a systematic literature review and discourse analysis on previously published materials that have built a stereotypical image of women over the years.

- *Ethical Consideration*

Ethical norms were upheld while conducting this research in order to guarantee a fair and ethical use of data and research methodologies. By referencing all research papers and acknowledging other literary works used, this study has appropriately followed the ethical guidelines. Furthermore, it has used both in-text citations and an appropriate work-referenced list to demonstrate the originality and reliability of this study.

Results

- *First research question: What are the biased factors that have been reflected in international media?*

Netflix is an international media conglomerate whose two television series- *Sex Education* and *Ginny and Georgia* have been sampled for the current study. Both television series are women-centric, with female protagonists representing linguistic, structural and social factors. The notion of choice is a significant element in any SFL as it is the decision of the textual creators to make a choice of the function, language, semiotic and semantics they want to choose. In order to interpret *Sex Education* and *Ginny and Georgia* as creative texts, it is crucial to identify the contrasting female characters and their identities shaped by the over-the-top (OTT) platforms.

Keeping this statement in mind, it can be said that the meanings attached to the different characters incorporate the expression of idealisation, interpersonal relations and meanings. Therefore,

these characters contain potential factors like excessive exposure or submissive nature, which has been celebrated among young individuals as the perfect female identity. It is significant to understand that Netflix producing female characters with biased factors like submissive, fancy and high-maintenance impacts the global female identity as every country has its respective view and identity of women (Goixart Serra, 2022). These new female protagonists influence the contemporary representation of females from a pop-cultural societal perspective that often mismatches the conservative picture of female identity. Table 1 presents the attributes, themes and archetypes represented in the main characters of the two TV series.

Table 1. Attributes, themes and archetypes represented in the main characters

Character Name	Attribute	Theme	Archetype
Sex Education			
Maeve Wiley	Dominant	Ambitious and rebellious	Wise and Wild
Emily Sands	Docile and submissive	Quiet, dreamer and explorer	Timid and mystic
Ruby	Submissive	Popular girl and dominant attitude	Wise
Ginny and Georgia			
Georgia	Dominant	A single mother with a westernised character	Wild
Ginny	Submissive	Timid and ignorant	Mystic and wise
Cynthia Fuller	Dominant	Cunning and negative	Mystic and wild

The protagonists portrayed by the international media contained several biased factors like possessing extremely wild archetypes and carefree nature, wherein in reality, if identified from social contexts, female identity is more comprehensibly ordained with responsibilities where elements like being excessively dominant just to assert power are abrupt and falsely engaged (Goixart Serra, 2022). Female identity has been shaped throughout the decades with elements like dominant attributes to protest for a cause. However, portraying Georgia from *Ginny and Georgia*, where the single mother uses her dominant courage and beauty to safeguard her children from the bad powers, seems unrealistic and goes beyond the function of what actually stands for the text 'dominant' and 'courage'. International organisations have been using elements in order to break free from the stereotypical representation of female characters within the television industry. However, the creators have no idea the way these female identities cater to the social needs of the society where social roles and attitudes are highly reconstructed through these varied representations.

- *Second research question: What attributes define the stereotypical representation of international media?*

Systematic Functional Linguistics considers language as an important component of the cultural and socioeconomic system, and it is the responsibility of the creators to explain the choices they make while interpreting the meanings associated with the female identity, thereby using specific textuality like behavioural aspects and character archetypes as a form of expressive resources within the language. Moreover, the way language is being used can only be understood around the environment it is being used. Keeping this statement in mind, it can be said that an image designed by the international organisation can be only understood by the people who are immersed in these texts. Outside this periphery, the identity of the popular culture women becomes invalid.

One of the most important aspects of Systematic Functional Linguistics is semantics which helps in the detailed analysis of the fundamental function of the language used. Therefore, using semantics and its aspects, different language and textuality used by international media can be better analysed. There are three types of functions that determine the semantics within Systematic Functional Linguistics- ideational, interpersonal and textual. The first aspect offers an in-depth identification of the central idea of the context or the message as it gives the readers an awareness of the environment around which it has been generated. Next, interpersonal function helps determine the social world that connects the viewers and the identity. Therefore, it can be said that the interpersonal function of semantics within Systematic Functional Linguistics helps in identifying the social environment around which the female identity is being developed. Third, the textuality function of semantics deals with the flow of information and how it is perceived by the audience. Table 2 depicts these three functions in a few selected articles included in this brief SLR.

Table 2: Functions that determine semantics within SFL

Author	Ideational Function	Interpersonal Function	Textual Function
Özkan and Hardt (2020)	The central idea of this article focuses on how Netflix has been representing strong female leads in the postfeminist media culture.	This article analysed Netflix's role in evaluating female led-narratives by applying unique attributes that helps communicate with society.	The article highlights the ambiguity of postfeminist media culture, which has "become the new normal, a taken-for-granted common sense," which troubles how women are portrayed in these stories.
Sandhu (2020)	The central idea of the article is how international media like Netflix and Hollywood have used various tropes like 'super abilities' to marginalise the identity of race, women and disability.	The article has focused on the negative stereotypes employed by the international media to represent altering views of characters that, in turn, impact the viewers of society.	International organisations have been responsible for advocating female, racial and disability identity through such a negative lens that it has led to the false promotion of female identity.
Kondrat (2015)	The female representation within video games also influences people to determine their assumed values of gender. The central aspect of the article is the over-representation of stereotypes and violence attached to female figures.	The article has focused on how disrespectful images of women in video games communicate with society, especially young players.	Negative stereotyping of female characters has led video games to be published and curated by international media to disseminate false information on women's representation.
Evans (2021)	The article has focused on the content of Netflix focused on the whitewashing of female characters with limited diversified content.	Streaming television content has been identified as the most dominant way of consuming media. Therefore the limited presentation of female identity has proven towards the limited identification of women in society.	The article has focused on stereotypes that persisted within Netflix. With storytelling limitations and limited portrayal of female characteristics, the international organisation has been interpreted as a medium that does not allow the audience to immerse in the complex aspects of female identity.

Discussion

In order to achieve the first objective and answer the first research question, the study used two television series *Sex Education* and *Ginny and Georgia*. For example, in *Ginny and Georgia*, Georgia being the mother of two, showcases her masculinity by using a gun in the house. Even though Netflix is a global medium, it portrays this scene as an independent mother protecting her children from evils of the society, though the message can be interpreted otherwise within other societies. This has been supported by Özkan and Hardt (2020) in their article, where they suggested that these women who fall into the category of strong female leads are valued for their portrayal of masculinity, which is viewed favourably as strength, rather than for their femininity, which is otherwise viewed negatively as a sign of weakness. Thus, from an SFL point of view, the contextuality of the series and the way the creators wanted to convey the images of female identity has been different.

Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) presents the context of a situation from three aspects- field, tenor and mode. The model of context relates closely to the dynamic structure of field, tenor and mode (O'Donnell, 2021). Firstly, the field of context refers to understanding what the text is about and how it helps viewers across the globe get its literal meaning. The second component of tenor refers to the bodies present within the context that allows constructing communication and reflects their relationship. The current context of how international organisations shape female identity refers to the close contact between Netflix and its consumers. The third component of mode helps in the identification of the language, its function and how it works towards the interaction. Therefore, it is essential to view the context in which Netflix, an international organisation, is exhibiting those female characters from a global perspective with a diverse audience (Kilic & Cakir, 2021; Masterson & Messina, 2023).

In *Sex Education*, from the perspective of context, the field of the series is about a bunch of high schoolers eager to talk and explore their sexuality within a stereotype-free society (Goixart Serra, 2022). However, the way the female characters have been designed within the series environment presents a contrast towards which the society must rely on, a woman like Maeve Wiley or Emily Sands. Tenor within the text refers to how well these female characters have been communicating with the young consumers of

the show, who are incredibly passive. This means that the characters highly influence consumers across the world to adopt a similar behavioural attitude in order to assert power or feminism. Mode analyses how the languages used for defining and shaping women in the popular culture context function with the consumers of the show. Here the mode has taken place through multimedia usage with the bi-directional channel. For instance, young girls who act defiant like Maeve Wiley inside the school or quiet, submissive women are made fun of for exhibiting traits similar to Emily Sands (Goixart Serra, 2022).

In *Ginny and Georgia*, the field of the context defines that it is a story about a single mother and her struggles with two children. The tenor of the context deals with how characters like Georgia, Ginny and Cynthia interact with the female consumers of the show. The power relations that the female identity of Georgia holds with its admirers of the show have much to do with the contemporary view of the single mother. This feminine identity is fiercely challenged and not recognised in many cultural contexts. Particularly when viewed from a westernised perspective, this would appear to be the ideal depiction of a modern female character, but the truth is much different. Thirdly, from the perspective of mode, this current language of female identity has been expressed through the use of multimedia, where communication is spontaneous and reciprocal. Therefore, these biased representations of female identity in the contemporary cultural context have resulted in the development of altering views of women.

The articles reviewed to answer the second research question have focused on attributes like post-feminist culture, marginalisation, over-representation, violence and limited representation that define the stereotypical representation of international media. Truly speaking, female identity shaped by an international organisation like Netflix and others media conglomerates like the large game industry has been extensively reviewed by previous scholars to undermine the trend of female representation. According to Yunjuan and Xiaoming (2007), the relationship between mass media and society has long been reinforced by the ideologies of the agents of social change and the re-enforcers of the status quo. This means that the power holders of the society decide what kind of female identity image must be circulated to maintain their control of the societal beliefs and identification of women. Supporting this, Yunjuan and Xiaoming (2007) further assert that it is a symbolic image of women rather than a literal portrayal of "reality," produced through the intersection of party ideology, editorial policy, readers' preferences, as well as the shifting realities of female lives and work.

The various aspects of semantics within Systematic Functional Linguistics offer a detailed insight into the content, relationship with the social world and the flow of information within the various articles. For instance, Özkan and Hardt (2020) focus on the representation of strong female leads by Netflix, where the authors have argued that the best way of presenting women through the international platform is to recode attributes like sensitivity, emotions, and gentleness from a positive perspective. The article offers insight into the interpersonal relationships between the mediated texts and the consumers of these texts, created by Netflix and similar other OTT platforms like Amazon and Hulu.

The fact that feminism has been defined as a valuable and positive trait through hyper-masculine female identity defines the textual aspect of the semantics and the way these viewpoints dominate the global information flow (Aarthi & Latha, 2022). According to media analyst Jason Mittell, a Netflix show's perceived popularity and cultural capital determine whether it succeeds or fails, not the number of viewers (Özkan & Hardt, 2020). Therefore, these stereotypes have helped consumers to get immersed in the brand's cultural aspect and view the world through the lens of these international organisations. On the other hand, Kondrat (2015) focuses on how various games like *Assassins Creed* form a major part of the international organisation to devote major time to shape stereotypical female identity. From a denotative level, the games appear to be simple with tough rules appropriate for user competition.

However, the interpersonal relationship between these games, the players and the female characters, connote a different picture. The portrayal of women has been designed with a stereotypical attributes like excessive violence, abduction and usage of abusive language towards the female characters. As a result, semantics, through SFL, highlighted how multiple articles had taken a similar perspective regarding the way that international organisations have developed a shared stereotyped female identity.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to use SFL to identify the stereotypical female identity that is presented by global media companies like Netflix under the influence of semantics and context. Based on the Systematic Functional Linguistics strategy of context and semantics, this paper first discussed the biased representation of female characters within Netflix. Netflix, as an international organisation, has been held responsible for demonstrating qualities of female characters that people across the globe from different societal backgrounds can barely relate to. Systematic Functional Linguistics has offered a different insight into the two chosen television series produced by Netflix-*Sex Education* and *Ginny and Georgia*. The female characters- Maeve Wiley, Emily Sands, Ginny, Georgia and others have been closely analysed from the aspect of context to understand how the international language defining women has been used as a tool to

define that only masculine characteristics can represent a woman powerful and assertive in nature. Therefore, the contemporary texts developed by Netflix to influence young consumers conflict with the social reality of what strong femininity looks like.

Additionally, a westernised version of female identity provides a biased insight into white supremacy and extreme masculinity that often diverts from the selected genre of the texts. Similarly, previous scholars have also defined Netflix as the centre towards demonstrating stereotypical character attributes that have influenced shaping female identity. Semantic components like ideation, interpersonal and textuality have been used to dissect the articles written on stereotypical female representation by international organisations. Attributes like post-feminist culture, marginalisation, over-representation, violence and limited representation have been found to have been shaping women for a long now. These attributes have been understood by the consumers in a broader sense as they try to gain the major content of the programs in the beginning. The meanings perceived by the audience form an interpersonal relationship between them and the media texts. Therefore, this exchange focuses on the fact that consumers of this mediated text begin to believe that excessive masculinity or over-representation of female characters by Netflix is the ideal way of viewing female characters, and they, in turn, shape reality. These stereotyped attributes defined by the authors have been responsible for creating a certain materialistic structure of the female identity that deviates from the realistic expectation of how the female identity should be fashioned by a potent global media organisation.

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