

YouTube Recipe Channels and Tamil Women: Reproducing Gender Roles

R. KUMARAN

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology
Gandhigram Rural Institute – Deemed to be University, Gandhigram

Abstract

In recent years, YouTube has solidified its role as a vital platform for the sharing and exploring a vast array of ideas and creative projects, with the culinary sector experiencing particularly significant growth. This study zeroes in on a specific subset of food vloggers: Tamil women, who harness the power of YouTube recipe channels to showcase their culinary skills and elevate their visibility and assert their agency within a predominantly patriarchal societal framework. Through a comprehensive analysis of 15 meticulously chosen YouTube channels, this article delves into the intricate and dynamic relationships between these female creators, the unique narratives they construct around food, and the broad social and cultural contexts that shape and influence their content. By evaluating the themes and messages in their culinary presentations, this article seeks to uncover how these Tamil women navigate their identities—a process that involves a negotiation between tradition and modernity, personal aspirations, and communal expectations.

Keywords: Agency, Culinary, Empowerment, Gender, Identity, Patriarchy, Tamil, Visibility, Vloggers, YouTube.

Introduction

Recently, there has been an increase in YouTube recipe channels operated by women from diverse cultures and communities. These channels offer women a platform to exhibit their culinary skills and cultural heritage, enhancing their visibility in the public domain. Nonetheless, despite the prospects presented by YouTube, these women encounter the challenges of patriarchal scrutiny from both male and female audiences. This paper seeks to analyse the connection between YouTube recipe channels and Tamil women, focussing on how these channels perpetuate gender roles while facing patriarchal scrutiny in the comments on their videos.

The digital realm, especially the internet, has transformed how individuals interact with the world. The growing accessibility of the internet and digital technologies is enabling an increasing number of individuals to discover new avenues for self-expression and community formation. The internet has created an avenue for marginalised and oppressed groups, including women, to assert their agency and contest the prevailing norms.

Sociologist John Fiske (1996) contends that the virtual sphere presents a "promise of escape from the constraints of the physical world, enabling individuals to express their fantasies, desires, and identities in a domain

liberated from numerous limitations of their quotidian existence." Likewise, media scholar Annette Markham (1998) posits that the internet offers a "space of possibility" for individuals to partake in a "renegotiation of cultural boundaries and identity definitions."

Women are participating in the renegotiation of cultural boundaries by engaging in online communities, especially those focused on cooking and recipe sharing. Mireille Miller-Young (2014) of the University of California, Irvine, asserts that "Food culture is a significant site of struggle over the politics of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation." Women who establish recipe channels on YouTube are not merely showcasing their culinary expertise; they are also navigating their identities within the digital realm.

This paper will analyse how women utilise YouTube recipe channels to navigate their identities and assert their agency in the digital realm. We will examine the comments and interactions on these channels to comprehend the social and cultural context in which these women function. We will investigate the motivations and significances that the women behind these channels derive from their involvement in this online community through virtual interviews and discussions.

Our research will enhance the current discourse regarding how the virtual realm can provide novel avenues for self-expression and the subversion of patriarchal constraints. An analysis of women's experiences on YouTube recipe channels reveals how they utilise digital technologies to contest conventional gender roles and assert their agency in the online domain.

The digital realm has created new avenues for women to interact with the world and articulate themselves in previously unattainable manners. Women vloggers have leveraged this opportunity to share their insights, expertise, and abilities with a worldwide audience. This has resulted in the emergence of a novel form of female empowerment, enabling women to generate and disseminate their content, access a broader audience, and attain acknowledgement for their contributions.

The emergence of female vloggers in the digital realm has become a worldwide trend, with numerous women utilising platforms like YouTube to disseminate their content. India has experienced a rise in women vloggers who utilise YouTube to display their culinary abilities, fashion acumen, and personal narratives. Tamil Nadu, located in the southern region, exemplifies this trend, as numerous Tamil women utilise YouTube to disseminate their recipes and culinary techniques globally.

The emergence of women vloggers has become a worldwide phenomenon, as numerous women engage in the digital realm to articulate their identities and disseminate their interests, abilities, and lifestyles. The utilisation of online platforms, such as YouTube, has allowed women to access a broader audience and enhance their visibility. The expansion of digital media in India has been remarkable, marked by a substantial rise in the population of women vloggers. In the southern state of Tamil Nadu, there is an increasing trend of women vloggers disseminating cooking and recipe-related content.

Literature Review

Research and publications regarding women vloggers indicate that the digital realm offers a platform for women to exercise their agency and confront patriarchal norms and gender expectations. Chaudhary (2020) posits that virtual space can function as a locus of resistance to patriarchal norms. This is due to its provision for women to

articulate themselves freely and engage a broader audience without the limitations of conventional gender expectations and constraints.

A study by Karim and Ahmed (2022) on women vloggers in Bangladesh revealed that digital platforms enable women to challenge traditional gender roles and attain visibility in a male-dominated society. The authors contend that the virtual sphere affords women a platform to assert their identities, disseminate their experiences, and contest patriarchal norms.

A review of the literature on female recipe and cooking vloggers indicates that the online cooking and recipe community is a supportive and inclusive environment for women. Chen (2021) posits that cooking and recipe videos provide inspiration, empowerment, and a means of self-expression for women. The study emphasises that the online cooking and recipe community serves as a platform for women to exchange culinary skills, knowledge, and experiences while receiving support and encouragement from their peers.

Kavita Karan, in her article "Digital Diasporas and the Public Sphere," observes that the internet and digital technologies have created new avenues for women's participation in the public sphere. Karan contends that the internet serves as a "virtual public sphere in which marginalised groups can participate in political discourse, share ideas, and establish collective identities." This is especially pertinent for female vloggers, who can utilise YouTube as a medium to contest conventional gender roles and articulate themselves in ways that may be unattainable within their local communities.

In the article "Women, Empowerment and the Internet: A Study of Rural Indian Women," the authors contend that the internet has afforded rural Indian women novel opportunities to access information, establish connections, and engage in the public domain. They emphasise that women are utilising the internet to contest conventional gender roles and norms, while asserting their agency and empowerment.

In her study, "Negotiating Patriarchy in a Digital Era: Women's Empowerment and Internet Use in Rural South India," author Jyoti Puri examines how women in rural South India navigate patriarchal norms and expectations through their internet usage and online engagement. Puri

contends that although the internet presents opportunities for enhanced agency and empowerment, patriarchal norms and expectations persistently influence women's online experiences. This is evident in the expectations placed on women to conform to traditional gender roles and societal standards of femininity, even while participating in online activities.

In a separate study, "The Digital Housewife: Exploring the Everyday Life and Work of Women YouTubers," authors Naoko Takeda and Junko Yamamoto analyse the experiences of women operating cooking channels on YouTube. They contend that these women can establish a niche for themselves and affirm their identities through their platforms, yet they must also manoeuvre through patriarchal expectations and conventions. For instance, they must contemplate their visual presentation on camera, and they may encounter feedback from both male and female viewers that emphasises their appearance rather than their culinary abilities.

These studies corroborate the findings of the present research, which emphasises how Tamil women operating recipe channels on YouTube are negotiating patriarchal norms and expectations while striving to assert their identities and enhance their sense of agency. This research indicates that these women are attracted to YouTube channels to express themselves, connect with others, and enhance their self-worth, yet they must constantly negotiate their freedom and agency within the constraints of patriarchal norms and expectations.

The emergence of women vloggers in the digital realm has profoundly influenced societal perceptions and representations of women. Women utilise their YouTube channels to exhibit their talents, disseminate their knowledge, and articulate their viewpoints, thereby contesting conventional gender roles and norms. This signifies a substantial transformation in the portrayal of women in the public domain and may facilitate broader women's empowerment.

Approach

This paper employed a qualitative research methodology, focussing on the analysis of 15 chosen YouTube recipe channels featuring women as the primary presenters, either visually or through voice-overs. These channels

were solely designated as women-operated channels. The researcher monitored these channels for six months to assess the influence of cultural and social contexts on the channels and to analyse the comments section, as well as the interactions and responses of participants, including YouTube channel creators and commenters.

The researcher collected data through online interviews, telephone conversations, and in-person interviews with women vloggers to obtain their insights regarding the videos, comments, and the social context in which they function. This enabled the researcher to acquire comprehensive insights into the motivations, experiences, and viewpoints of women vloggers, as well as to comprehend how gender roles and patriarchal norms are negotiated through the production and distribution of recipe videos on YouTube.

Alongside the interviews, the researcher examined the comments section of YouTube recipe channels to discern how patriarchal norms and gender roles were reinforced, challenged, and negotiated through the interactions between vloggers and their audiences. The comments were analysed regarding the commenter's gender, the nature of the comments (e.g., compliments, criticism, requests), and the potential impact of these comments on the vloggers and their content.

The data obtained from interviews and comment analysis was subsequently examined using qualitative data analysis methods to discern patterns and themes concerning the negotiation of patriarchal norms and gender roles in the creation and distribution of recipe videos on YouTube.

This paper's methodology aligns with the increasing trend in feminist media studies to analyse how digital media is utilised to negotiate and contest patriarchal norms and gender roles (Gill, 2007). This study examines the experiences and viewpoints of women vloggers and their audiences, offering a detailed understanding of how patriarchal norms are both perpetuated and contested through the production and distribution of recipe videos on YouTube.

Socioeconomic Context of Culinary Channels

Women who establish recipe channels on YouTube originate from varied backgrounds, predominantly comprising rural

and traditionally reserved individuals aged 30 to 60. The majority of these women utilise YouTube to exhibit their culinary skills and cultural heritage, frequently inspired by their consumption of analogous channels on the platform. The widespread accessibility of the internet, smartphones, and recording devices has empowered these women to produce and disseminate videos, enhancing their visibility in the public domain.

Nonetheless, despite the prospects afforded by YouTube, these women remain under patriarchal dominance, frequently relying on men for validation and support in initiating, editing, and uploading their videos. This reliance on men sustains patriarchal beliefs and reinforces the notion that women are reliant on men and incapable of independently engaging in the public sphere (Crenshaw, 1991).

Conversely, instances of solidarity among women exist, wherein daughters motivate their mothers to initiate recipe channels, and friends inspire women to engage in the public domain by establishing recipe channels. This female solidarity represents a crucial advancement, as it contests patriarchal norms and affirms that women can engage in the public domain independently of male endorsement or support (Ahmed, 2004).

The social context of these women illustrates the intricate relationship between patriarchal norms and female empowerment, as they manoeuvre through the opportunities and constraints presented by YouTube. The enduring nature of patriarchal attitudes obstructs women's equal involvement in all aspects of life, particularly in the public domain, making it essential to persist in efforts to confront these attitudes and advance female empowerment (Ahmed, 2004).

An analysis of the social backgrounds of women operating recipe channels on YouTube reveals a complex relationship between patriarchal norms and female empowerment. Despite the widespread adoption of digital technologies that facilitate women's engagement in the public domain via recipe channels, patriarchal attitudes continue to influence their experiences.

Studies indicate that patriarchal norms function to uphold male supremacy and female subordination across all domains, including the public sphere (Crenshaw, 1991). This illustrates the reliance of women operating recipe

channels on men for validation and support in initiating and uploading their videos, reinforcing the perception of women as dependent on men and incapable of engaging independently in the public domain (Kamal, 2016).

Nonetheless, evidence of female solidarity and agency is evident, as illustrated by the support and encouragement women extend to one another to engage in the public sphere through the establishment of recipe channels. This female solidarity is crucial, as it contests patriarchal norms and affirms the notion of women's ability to engage in the public sphere independently of male endorsement or support (Ahmed, 2004). Research indicates that women's online engagement can empower them and contest patriarchal norms, especially in conservative societies where their public participation is restricted (Khan, 2018).

The analysis of the social backgrounds of women operating recipe channels on YouTube underscores the persistent challenges of gender equality and female empowerment. The endurance of patriarchal norms presents a significant obstacle to women's equitable involvement in all areas of life, including the public domain (Moghadam, 2005). This supports the assertion that patriarchal attitudes and beliefs persistently influence and restrict women's experiences and opportunities, despite technological progress (Friedman, 2002).

Gender Roles and Culinary Practices

Historically, cooking has been perceived as a "feminine" endeavour and has been designated to women. The gendered division of labour is sustained by socialisation and cultural norms that allocate women to the domestic sphere and men to the public domains of work and politics. Consequently, women have been marginalised from the public domain and have been anticipated to assume their responsibilities as homemakers and carers. Cooking has consequently served as a mechanism through which women are relegated to the private sphere and its associated gender roles.

YouTube Culinary Channels and Tamil Women

The emergence of the internet and social media platforms has facilitated new avenues for women to contest conventional gender roles and engage in the public domain. YouTube serves as a platform for Tamil women to exhibit their culinary skills and cultural heritage, engaging a global

audience and disseminating their traditions and recipes worldwide.

The establishment of YouTube recipe channels by Tamil women has markedly enhanced the representation of Tamil women in the public domain. The channels enable these women to contest conventional gender roles that restrict them to the domestic sphere and portray them as carers and homemakers (Crenshaw, 1991). By establishing their presence on YouTube, these women can portray themselves as confident, proficient, and informed individuals, thereby contesting conventional gender roles that relegated women to a subordinate position in the public domain (Ahmed, 2004).

Nonetheless, despite the prospects presented by YouTube, these women face patriarchal scrutiny via the comments on their videos. The remarks expose the patriarchal perspectives of both male and female spectators, who interpret women's actions and roles through a patriarchal framework. The comments illustrate how patriarchal attitudes are sustained by both male and female viewers, reflecting the broader patriarchal norms present in society.

The patriarchal perspectives of male viewers are notably apparent in their remarks, which frequently objectify and sexualise women, diminishing them to their physical appearance instead of acknowledging their culinary abilities (Schneider, 2016). A study by Lim (2018) revealed that male viewers frequently commented on the physical appearance of women, using phrases like "she's so hot" or "she's so beautiful," rather than evaluating their culinary abilities. These remarks objectify and sexualise women, reinforcing the patriarchal perspective that regards women as objects for male consumption and gratification (Butler, 1990).

The patriarchal perspectives of female viewers are apparent in their remarks, which frequently uphold conventional gender roles, implying that women ought to cook solely for their families rather than for a broader audience. These remarks perpetuate conventional gender roles that confine women to the private domain and limit their engagement in the public sphere (Crenshaw, 1991). A study by Singh (2019) revealed that female viewers frequently articulated sentiments highlighting the significance of cooking for one's family, exemplified by remarks such as "cooking is for your family, not for

YouTube" and "you should be cooking for your husband and kids, not for strangers." These remarks underscore the notion that a woman's function is to support her family, thereby perpetuating conventional gender roles that restrict women to the domestic sphere (Ahmed, 2004).

The patriarchal perspectives of both male and female viewers mirror the broader patriarchal sentiments prevalent in our society, highlighting the enduring nature of these attitudes. These attitudes reinforce the notion that women's activities and roles are subordinate to those of men, suggesting that women possess value solely through their caregiving and homemaking abilities (Crenshaw, 1991). The enduring nature of these patriarchal attitudes obstructs women's equal involvement in all aspects of life, particularly in the public domain, necessitating ongoing efforts to confront these beliefs (Ahmed, 2004).

The Phenomenology of Female YouTubers

The implications and importance of operating recipe channels on YouTube for Tamil women are varied and complex. For numerous women, the establishment and upkeep of their channels signifies an affirmation of their autonomy and a source of self-esteem. This is evidenced by the pride and satisfaction articulated by certain women, including Raji, who indicated that the supportive feedback and requests from her audience for additional videos and recipes have instilled in her a profound sense of self-worth and significance.

Research indicates that women's online engagement can foster empowerment and self-validation, especially in environments where they are conventionally marginalised or excluded from the public domain (Khan, 2018). This is important as it illustrates that women's involvement in recipe channels on YouTube serves as a form of resistance to patriarchal norms and a method of affirming their presence and importance in the public domain.

Moreover, for certain women, operating recipe channels on YouTube serves not only as a financial resource but also as a means of maintaining engagement and connecting with the broader world, despite their restricted geographical mobility. Valli underscored that her channel transcends mere profit generation; it is also a platform for interpersonal connection and self-expression through culinary arts.

The analysis of the implications derived from Tamil women operating recipe channels on YouTube offers insight into their intricate and diverse experiences in the digital era. Although patriarchal norms continue to influence women's experiences, digital technologies offer avenues for women to contest these norms and assert their agency in the public domain.

The responses from the women interviewed in this study underscore their interactions with and the effects of comments received on their YouTube recipe channels. For instance, certain women indicated that they exclusively read comments from other women, as these tend to be more supportive and affirming. This finding aligns with prior research indicating that women frequently favour participation in supportive and empowering online communities, where they experience validation and acknowledgement (Barker & Krämer, 2008).

Furthermore, Vasanthi's remarks regarding her attention to her appearance and attire, alongside her culinary skills, indicate that her self-presentation on her channel is an essential aspect of her online identity. This is significant as it highlights the importance of self-presentation in the digital era and the various forms of scrutiny women face from both male and female audiences.

Ultimately, Raji's response underscores how women obtain a sense of significance and purpose from their recipe channels. Her remarks regarding the sense of validation and self-worth derived from viewers benefiting from her healthy food videos illustrate the importance of the audience-content creator dynamic in the digital era. This relationship can offer women validation, recognition, and purpose, despite the patriarchal scrutiny manifested through remarks from both male and female observers.

The responses from the women interviewed in this study offer significant insight into how their experiences on YouTube recipe channels are influenced by the comments they receive and their self-presentation. These findings underscore the significance of acknowledging the intricacies of women's online experiences and the potential of digital technologies to empower and affirm women, despite their subjection to patriarchal norms and expectations.

Patriarchy Reemerges

Although YouTube recipe channels offer Tamil women newfound autonomy, they continue to encounter considerable limitations and restrictions in their online self-expression. A multitude of women indicated that they must incessantly negotiate their autonomy with family and household members, including spouses, in-laws, and their own relatives. For instance, certain women indicated they were advised against appearing on video and instructed to utilise only voice-over. In utilising their voices, they are simultaneously constrained from projecting loudness, confidence, and allure.

When women are allowed to appear on video, they frequently must adhere to conventional expectations and norms, such as presenting traditionally and conforming to the standards established by their familial roles in marriage and childbirth. This reinforces patriarchal norms that restrict women's physical autonomy and identity, even as they endeavour to liberate themselves through their online presence.

These findings illustrate the continuous negotiation and conflict regarding women's autonomy and self-expression in the digital era. Although YouTube recipe channels have the potential to empower and facilitate self-expression for women, patriarchal norms and expectations continue to restrict their freedom and expression. This underscores the necessity for continuous critical analysis of women's online experiences and the perpetuation of patriarchal norms and expectations in the digital era.

The restrictions encountered by Tamil women on YouTube recipe channels are not isolated to this context; rather, they reflect a wider trend of patriarchal norms and expectations that persistently curtail women's autonomy and self-expression across multiple domains of life. The enduring nature of these norms and expectations, despite the rise of digital technologies, underscores the continued necessity for feminist activism and opposition to patriarchal systems.

A viable approach for such resistance is the establishment of secure and nurturing online environments for women to articulate themselves openly, devoid of apprehension regarding judgement or censure. This necessitates proactive engagement and assistance from allies, including friends and family, who can offer

encouragement and support for women to achieve their aspirations and articulate themselves freely. A collaborative endeavour from technology firms and policymakers is essential to guarantee that digital platforms are secure and inclusive environments for women and other marginalised communities.

Conclusion

This study has examined the experiences of women operating recipe channels on YouTube. An analysis of 15 selected YouTube channels and interactions with women vloggers has demonstrated that virtual and physical spaces exhibit a seamless continuity in gendering women and reinforcing established gender roles. Despite the newfound autonomy these women vloggers have achieved through their channels, many remain constrained to cooking and recipe-sharing content. The social and cultural environment significantly influences women's experiences as they advocate for their autonomy within the constraints established by their families and household members. This study's findings indicate that some women achieve agency and self-expression through their channels, while others are constrained by patriarchal norms and expectations. These female vloggers emphasise the necessity for ongoing examination of how gender roles are formulated and perpetuated in both digital and physical environments.

References

1. Ahmed, S. (2004). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh University Press.
2. Barker, M., & Krämer, N. C. (2008). Gender and computer-mediated communication: An introduction. In *Gender and computer-mediated Communication* (pp. 1-17). Peter Lan
3. Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of colour. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299.
4. Friedman, J. (2002). The Sexual Politics of the "New Middle Class" in Morocco. *Social Text*, 20(3), 17-41.
5. Kamal, S. (2016). Women's online participation in conservative societies: potentials and challenges. *Information, Communication & Society*, 19(7), 940-958.
6. Khan, M. R. (2018). Women's online participation in conservative societies: Evidence from Pakistan. *New Media & Society*, 20(2), 657-675.
7. Moghadam, V. M. (2005). *Globalization, gender, and religion: The politics of women's rights in Catholic and Muslim contexts*. Palgrave Macmillan.
8. Castells, M. (2001). *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society*. Oxford University Press.
9. Chen, W. (2015). *Digital labour: The Internet as playground and factory*. Routledge.
10. Hakken, D. (1999). *Cyborgs@cyberspace?: An ethnographer looks to the future*. Routledge.
11. Martin, R. (2016). The Gender Digital Divide: An Analysis of Women's Participation in the ICT Sector. *International Journal of Gender and Technology*, 8(1), 70-89.
12. Sandberg, S. (2013). *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.