



Navigating Non-Monogamy: An Exploratory Study of Media Representation and Personal Perspectives among Indian Women

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Abstract

This study examines and explores the intersection of media representation and individual perspectives regarding women in non-monogamous relationships. The paper compares traditional monogamous relationships with various non-monogamous structures, including hierarchical and non-hierarchical polyamory, open relationships, and swinging. This study examines how globalisation and the growing popularity of films and television series set in developed countries have influenced the perception of selected individuals in the Urban Indian context regarding non-monogamous relationships. The study also analyses how media portrayals challenge gender stereotypes and promotes women's sexual freedom and empowerment. The study uses a qualitative framework, including in depth case studies, literature review, and media analysis, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Through an examination of media portrayal, this study sheds light on potential for transformative social change. It further examines how cultural nationalism and the judiciary's normative adjudication collaboratively govern women's intimate lives, resulting in what can be termed a biopolitics of fidelity. By promoting more realistic portrayals, the media can nurture inclusive and empathetic perspectives on non-monogamous relationships and contribute to a more equitable social discourse.

Keywords: Gender Norms, Inclusivity, Media Representation, Non-Monogamy, Women

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Introduction

The linguistic parameters of non-monogamy, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, explains the term as “not of, relating to, or practicing monogamy” (“Non-monogamous”). While “monogamy” prescribes a relational framework restricted to a singular romantic or sexual partner, “non-monogamy” serves as an expansive umbrella term for various consensual frameworks, including polyamory, open relationships, swinging and more (Sheff 252-54). It is essential to distinguish these structures from the deceptive nature of infidelity. Non-monogamous arrangements fundamentally exist on informed consent, mutual negotiation, and a commitment to transparency across multiple partners (Balzarini et al.1).

In the landscape of contemporary popular culture, dominant narratives of intimacy remain anchored in the heteronormative ideal of “the one.” Sitcoms such as *How I Met Your Mother* reproduce traditional scripts centred on the pursuit of a singular, stable partnership often embedded within patriarchal gender roles (Bays, Carter and Thomas). However, the twenty-first century has witnessed an expansion in the visibility of alternative relational forms, facilitated by global media flows and the circulation of liberal discourses surrounding individual autonomy. Shifting social attitudes toward sexual behaviours, which vary across gender and sexual orientation, have further contributed to the normalisation, at least within the representational sphere, of diverse intimate arrangements (Blanc 1605–07).

Yet, this representational expansion has not yet yielded a uniformly progressive discourse. Instead, media portrayals of non-monogamous relationships, particularly those involving women, are characterised by a profound ideological duality. On one hand, these narratives appear to challenge inherent gender norms by foregrounding female desire and agency. On the other,

they frequently reinscribe normative boundaries by depicting non-monogamous women as unstable, morally questionable, or ultimately unfulfilled (Rukeyser et al.). This paper argues that such duality is constitutive. The media simultaneously enables and regulates the visibility of non-monogamous women, allowing for limited transgression while ultimately reaffirming dominant personal hierarchies.

The central inquiry of this study lies in understanding how media operates as a site of both representation and regulation in shaping perceptions of non-monogamous women. Rather than viewing media as a passive reflector of social change, this research approaches it as an active agent in the production of social meanings regarding gender and intimacy. The focus extends beyond individual attitudes to examine how media participates in the broader governance of intimate life.

This problem analyses particular significance in the Indian context, where evolving media representations intersect with deeply entrenched socio-cultural and legal frameworks. While globalised media circulates imaginaries of sexual liberalisation and relational plurality, these encounter a socio-political environment structured by heteronormative familialism and moral regulation (Banerjee 125–28). Consequently, the reception of these representations is not uniform but produces a complex negotiation between personal aspiration and cultural constraint.

Accordingly, this study examines the intersection of globalised media representation and the lived experiences of individuals in urban India. It asks: How do media portrayals of non-monogamy shape women's understanding of their interpersonal relationships within a context that continues to privilege monogamy? The paper advances a twofold argument. First, that media representations are structured by an ideological duality that both enables and constrains female agency, and

second, that in the Indian context, this duality is intensified by socio-legal frameworks that regulate intimacy, creating a tough terrain for the negotiation of non-monogamous identities.

By situating media representation within a framework of cultural governance, this study contributes by highlighting the tension between visibility and regulation in the construction of non-monogamous femininities. In doing so, it emphasises the necessity of distinguishing between global representational trends and their situated interpretations within specific socio-cultural contexts, addressing a critical gap in current analyses of non-monogamy and the media.

Methodology

The complex socio-legal landscape of contemporary India, increasingly shaped by a “biopolitics of fidelity” and ongoing heteronormative censorship, requires a qualitative research framework that emphasises depth over statistical range. This research uses a multi-dimensional phenomenological methodology that begins with a comprehensive literature review and media analysis to define the narrative, followed by the collection of primary data (Willis and Harvey 3). The literature review analyses current research on the sociology of intimacy and Indian jurisprudence, creating the historical and legal framework necessary for analysing the present norms of cultural governance. Simultaneously, a critical media analysis was conducted on a carefully chosen set of Western and Indian visual narratives, including the Spanish series *Elite* and Indian productions like *Gehraiyaan*, to pinpoint recurring tropes and the ideological duality that defines their representation (Montero and Madrona; Batra). This dual foundational phase establishes the semiotic framework for the subsequent Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which analyses the lived experience of individuals dealing with the tension between personal agency and state-sanctioned moral norms (Willis and

Harvey 3). By recognising participants as self-interpreting individuals, the methodology surpasses limited description, advancing towards a critical theorisation of how individuals interpret specific media texts when their personal experiences clash with dominant cultural narratives (Willis and Harvey 3–4).

To provide an integrated understanding, the study has used textual and media analysis that is supported and contextualized by qualitative data derived from in-depth, conversational interviews. Informal, semi-structured interviews were applied to implement primary data collection in order to establish a natural and unstructured conversational environment. With the aim to reduce social desirability bias and minimise the structural constraint that frequently limits conventional qualitative analysis, the researcher intentionally made use of pre-existing relationships and established social networks with the participants. The researcher aimed to systematically use a Google Forms driven, structured questionnaire as a dynamic digital interview guide. Participants were able to organically express their lived experiences and relationship frameworks with the help of this interface, which enabled the researcher to methodically follow important conceptual frameworks across sessions without interfering with the flow of discussion. The researcher obtained verbal informed consent before each session and completely anonymised all recorded data in order to maintain research ethics within this confidential context.

The selection of sample size is a deliberate approach to the underlying realities of the Indian context, where non-monogamy is still a stigmatised and mostly hidden practice. Due to the social unreliability associated with these relationship structures, traditional large-scale surveys are methodologically inadequate for capturing internal complexities. Consequently, this research employs selective sampling to select information-rich cases, specifically one male and one female participant from urban Indian centres, who demonstrate significant reflexivity

concerning their media consumption and relationship dynamics. This emphasis on two distinct individuals allows for narrative density, enabling a detailed analysis of the gendered disparities in the execution of non-monogamy. This methodological orientation aligns with the idiographic commitment of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which prioritises the density of experiential insight over statistical breadth, positioning small-scale selective sampling not as a structural limitation but as a theoretical necessity for capturing the intricate and scrutinised complexities of lived experience (Willis and Harvey 4–5). Data was gathered via semi-structured, narrative-centric interviews conducted in confidential environments, aimed at enabling participants to express how scrutinised media tropes affected their self-perception and personal interactions (Willis and Harvey 5). The findings from these case studies do not assert statistical generalisability to the larger Indian population. However, they offer substantial theoretical transferability. They provide a crucial framework for comprehending how urban individuals traverse the evolving parameters of intimacy, offering an intricate perspective on the negotiation of broader power structures within the individual psyche.

Women and Non-Monogamy

Academic inquiry into the sociology of intimacy often exhibits a relative lack of research regarding non-monogamy through a specifically gendered lens, particularly concerning how women's participation is conceptualised within feminist research. For decades, feminist inquiry has been preoccupied with the structural constraints of intimate life, highlighting how women are consistently positioned as relational subjects, ascribed to the roles of caregivers, nurturers, and the moral anchors of the domestic sphere (Banerjee 125–28). Within these patriarchal frameworks, women are mandated to embody devotion and sexual exclusivity, with marriage functioning as

both a social imperative and a biopolitical mechanism of regulation. Consequently, any woman who prioritises autonomy or self-realisation beyond this dyadic framework is frequently pathologised as deviant or anomalous (Rajasekaran).

In the Indian context, these normative expectations are further intensified by the socio-cultural and legal centrality of marriage. Here, marriage is not merely a matter of personal choice but a familial and national mandate, often detached from liberal discourses of romantic love. Women's identities remain tightly tethered to their roles as wives and mothers, sustaining a system where emotional and sexual exclusivity is not only expected but strictly policed. Within such a rigid framework, non-monogamy represents more than an alternative relational form, it is a profound disruption of deeply ingrained gender norms and the biopolitics of fidelity (Haritaworn et al. 515–16).

Theoretical frameworks suggest that non-monogamous structures hold the potential to reconfigure these scripts by decoupling intimacy from exclusivity and challenging the gendered distribution of emotional labour (Haritaworn et al. 518; Sheff 252). By foregrounding informed consent, multiplicity, and radical transparency, such arrangements may enable women to exercise greater sovereignty over their intimate lives. Media representations that depict women in polyamorous or open relationships often gesture toward this transformative potential, presenting characters who assert desire, negotiate personal boundaries, and actively resist conventional scripts of fidelity (Hardy and Easton 1–15).

However, this perceived expansion of agency must be approached with critical caution. Representations of non-monogamous women frequently remain embedded within broader ideological structures that regulate the extent of their transgression. While certain media narratives frame non-monogamy as liberatory, they often do so within highly

constrained parameters, privileging specific class positions, aesthetic body norms, and Westernised forms of expression (Antalffy). As a result, the figure of the non-monogamous woman is characterised by a duality, she is simultaneously represented as empowered and marginalised as unstable, excessive, or morally ambiguous. This tension is especially apparent in contemporary discourse surrounding sexual freedom. While non-monogamy is often presented as a site of liberation, it does not automatically dismantle entrenched inequalities. Gendered double standards persist, men's participation in multiple partnerships is more readily normalised as an expression of lust, while women continue to face heightened scrutiny and social stigma (Sheff 260–64). Thus, even within egalitarian structures, patriarchal hierarchies may be reproduced in more subtle, insidious forms.

Furthermore, scholars have drawn critical attention to the intersection of capitalist structures and intimate life. As discussed in interviews with Kristen Ghodsee, women's sexuality within neoliberal systems is shaped by a "bundle of shifting social expectations," where emotional and material dependencies are negotiated within the framework of the monogamous dyad ("Capitalism Is Ruining Your Sex Life"; Arnold). In this sense, non-monogamy can be read as a challenge to the economic and affective logics of traditional partnerships, potentially redistributing emotional labour. Yet this shift is neither automatic nor universal, it remains contingent on structural conditions, including class access and social privilege.

Additionally, while non-monogamous relationships emphasise individual autonomy, they also demand complex forms of emotional labour and self-regulation. The ideal of complete independence can often obscure the gruelling relational work necessary to sustain such arrangements, particularly in contexts where social support systems are hostile (Hardy and Easton 6–12). For women, this involves navigating

not only interpersonal dynamics but also constant external judgment and moral surveillance from the state and society.

Thus, rather than viewing non-monogamy as inherently emancipatory, it is more analytically productive to approach it as a contested terrain where possibilities for autonomy coexist with persistent structures of constraint. The participation of women in non-monogamous relationships does not simply signal a rupture from patriarchal norms; instead, it reveals an ongoing negotiation of power and legitimacy within shifting socio-cultural contexts. This inherent ambivalence underscores the necessity of critically examining the material conditions and representational frameworks through which non-monogamous femininities are both constructed and policed.

Mass Media Representation of Women with respect to Non-Monogamy

The representational landscape of non-monogamy, particularly when centred on women, constitutes a complex and often contradictory terrain within contemporary popular culture. While global media flows have increasingly integrated narratives of relational plurality, these depictions remain anchored in deeper ideological frameworks that regulate how female sexuality is visualised and evaluated. Rather than presenting a coherent rupture from monogamous scripts, media portrayals frequently oscillate between a surface-level normalisation and a subtle containment, producing an ideologically ambivalent field of representation.

A significant dimension of this portrayal continues to be structured by highly sexualised and androcentric imagery. In various forms of adult media, multiple-partner encounters are frequently depicted; however, such representations rarely challenge entrenched gender hierarchies. Instead, they often reinscribe heteronormative scripts, positioning women as

objects of the male gaze rather than as autonomous subjects possessing sexual agency (Sheff 254). Within this visual economy, female sexuality is rendered visible primarily for consumption, often detached from true individual sovereignty.

In contrast, certain contemporary narratives appear to gesture towards more agentic representations of non-monogamous femininities. Series such as *You Me Her* and in foundational texts like *The Ethical Slut*, Hardy and Easton attempt to foreground radical transparency, consent, and self-determination (Shepherd; Hardy and Easton 1–15). By presenting women as active architects of their relational lives, these portrayals depart from earlier tropes, acknowledging the intricate emotional and ethical dimensions of non-monogamy and contributing to a more nuanced public discourse.

However, even these seemingly progressive narratives remain embedded within broader structural constraints. Media portrayals frequently privilege specific subject positions—typically those that are urban, upper-class, and aligned with Westernised aesthetic norms (Antalffy). Consequently, non-monogamy is often framed as a viable lifestyle only for the socially and economically privileged, thereby marginalising diverse lived experiences and re-inscribing exclusion under the guise of liberal inclusivity. This selective visibility narrows the representational scope, suggesting that only certain bodies are capable of pursuing alternative structures.

Furthermore, mainstream media frequently simplifies or distorts the underlying principles of ethical non-monogamy. Dramatised representations, such as those in *Sex/Life* (Rukeyser et al.), often prioritise spectacle and transgression over the painstaking work of negotiation and mutual respect. Such narratives may inadvertently reproduce negative stereotypes by framing non-monogamous arrangements as inherently chaotic,

emotionally unstable, or morally questionable, thus reinforcing the very stigma they appear to explore.

Yet, there are instances where media texts have historically navigated these tensions with a degree of ambivalence. In the *Friends* episode “The One with the Butt,” the character Aurora demonstrates a complex engagement with non-monogamy (Season 1, ep. 6). While the character is subjected to a measure of objectification and moral scrutiny, the narrative grants her a level of legitimacy and emotional density, reflecting shifting cultural anxieties regarding alternative kinship forms. This suggests that representational duality is a persistent feature of media history rather than a modern anomaly.

Central to this analysis is the recognition that media acts as an active agent in the production of social meanings (Berlant 1–15). Representations that appear to expand the boundaries of visibility may simultaneously regulate transgression through narrative closure—where non-monogamous women are ultimately disciplined or returned to the monogamous dyad. In this sense, the media operates through a logic of permitted deviation, allowing for limited ruptures of the norm only to eventually reassert its stability.

Furthermore, the intersection of gender with class and respectability remains a crucial factor in shaping these outcomes (Banerjee 125–28). Women who embody sanctioned forms of femininity are more likely to be depicted with empathy, while those who deviate are often pathologised as excessive or morally suspect. This dynamic underscores the extent to which depictions of non-monogamy are mediated by broader regimes of social stratification and the biopolitics of fidelity.

Therefore, it is necessary to move beyond simple evaluations of accuracy to examine the ideological work performed by these representations. A critical approach must

analyse how the media simultaneously expands the imaginable while delimiting the terms of legitimacy. The figure of the non-monogamous woman thus emerges as a site of intense negotiation, where competing discourses of autonomy, desire, and moral regulation intersect.

In conclusion, media ambivalence should be understood as a constitutive feature of contemporary cultural production. It reflects the ongoing tension between evolving claims to sexual freedom and enduring structures of gendered control. Ultimately, these portrayals reveal the limits of visibility as a marker of emancipation, emphasising the need for more nuanced and diverse narratives that authentically represent the complexities of non-monogamous choices.

Moral Dilemma of Media Practitioners

The representational politics of non-monogamy are not merely a matter of visibility; they are fundamentally structured by the ethical and ideological anxieties of media practitioners navigating the tension between commercial imperatives and social regulation (Antalffy). Producers find themselves in a precarious position, attempting to articulate alternative relational imaginaries while remaining tethered to market-driven sensibilities and established cultural hierarchies. Consequently, the depiction of non-monogamous women emerges as a negotiated compromise—a site where the impulse for progressive disruption encounters the mechanisms of normative containment.

On one hand, media narratives of non-monogamous femininities gesture toward a biopolitics of empowerment, foregrounding sexual autonomy and the sovereignty of desire. By presenting women as agentic subjects who navigate multiple intimacies with reflexivity, these portrayals threaten to dismantle the heteronormative script that restricts female

identity to the monogamous dyad. Such representations act as active agents in the production of social meanings, potentially expanding the public discourse to acknowledge the legitimacy of diverse kinship forms.

However, this transformative potential is frequently disciplined by the structural constraints of cultural production. The neoliberal drive for viewership often necessitates the re-inscription of familiar moral frameworks, ensuring that transgression remains palatable to a mainstream audience. Even within ostensibly liberal narratives, non-monogamous arrangements are often framed through the lens of instability or tragic unfulfilment, eventually resolving into more “stable” heteropatriarchal structures (Rukeyser et al.). This pattern reveals a persistent ideological duality where the media enables a degree of representational rupture only to ultimately reaffirm the stability of the norm.

This dilemma is further complicated by the selective visibility that governs mass media. Portrayals typically privilege urban, upper-class subjectivities that align with Westernised aesthetic body norms, effectively framing relational plurality as an elite lifestyle. This selective gaze marginalises more diverse lived experiences, suggesting that only certain bodies are entitled to alternative structures. For media practitioners, the ethical challenge lies in resisting these exclusionary tropes and avoiding the reproduction of social stratification under the guise of inclusivity (Antalffy).

Furthermore, representational strategies often oscillate between the romanticisation of non-monogamy as a site of radical freedom and its pathologisation as a source of emotional chaos. As seen in series like *Sex/Life*, the prioritisation of spectacle frequently obscures the ethical labour—transparency, consent, and negotiation—that defines consensual non-monogamy. By emphasising transgression over ethical

complexity, the media inadvertently reinscribes the very stigma it seeks to explore, reinforcing public misconceptions of non-monogamous identities as inherently unstable (Hardy and Easton 1–15; Rukeyser et al.).

The persistence of gendered double standards remains a significant barrier to representational integrity. Women who deviate from the monogamous script continue to face a measure of moral scrutiny and objectification that is rarely applied to their male counterparts. These disparities reflect the broader regimes of social regulation that categorise female desire as “excessive” or morally suspect. Even when attempting to foreground agency, media texts may fall into the trap of sexualising female autonomy for the male gaze, thereby undermining true individual sovereignty (Sheff 260–64).

The ethical responsibility of cultural producers must, therefore, move beyond mere inclusion toward a more nuanced and situated analysis. Authentic representation requires a commitment to narrative density that acknowledges the intersection of class, gender, and socio-legal constraints. Practitioners must move beyond the flattened tropes of the “liberated woman” to present characters who navigate both the possibilities and the gruelling relational work inherent in non-monogamous choices.

Crucially, these representational choices are made within a broader ecosystem of cultural governance, including state-sanctioned censorship and platform guidelines (Banerjee 125–28). Such institutional pressures often lead to a form of internal self-regulation, where creators pre-emptively limit narrative transgression to avoid controversy or moral backlash. In the Indian context, this is intensified by a biopolitics of fidelity that views non-normative intimacy as a threat to national integrity, further circumscribing the imaginable parameters of non-monogamous femininities.

In summary, the moral dilemma of media practitioners is a persistent negotiation between the aspiration for social complexity and the pressure of ideological conformity. This tension does not yield neutral results. It produces an ambivalent field of representation that simultaneously offers glimpses of autonomy while maintaining the boundaries of legitimacy. These portrayals reveal the limits of visibility alone as a marker of social change.

Ultimately, the impact of media on public perception is contingent upon whether it reinforces existing prejudices or fosters a more empathetic and equitable discourse. A critical engagement with the politics of representation is essential for understanding how the media participates in the governance of intimate life. For non-monogamy to be understood as a valid relational form, it requires a shift away from superficial spectacle toward narratives that honour the complex negotiation of power, desire, and commitment.

Cultural Governance and the Biopolitics of Intimacy

In the contemporary Indian socio-political landscape, majoritarian cultural ideologies and judicial discourse do not merely coexist; rather, they operate within a shared discursive field where legal reasoning and political rhetoric frequently converge to shape the regulation of intimacy. Within this context, an idealised figure of Indian femininity emerges—one in which desire is disciplined through fidelity and individual autonomy is subordinated to the mandate of sacrifice. The traditional Hindu wife within a monogamous framework is constructed not only as the embodiment of ideal womanhood but also as a symbolic anchor of social and national stability (Banerjee 125–28). This construction extends beyond cultural nostalgia, operating as a biopolitical mechanism that stabilises collective identity by prescribing normative patterns of behaviour amidst rapid socio-cultural transformation.

The assertion that “Bharatiya sanskriti” functions as a site of moral repair situates women’s sexuality at the centre of national regeneration. The boundaries of virtuous citizenship are thus inscribed onto the body of the woman who adheres to a singular love, desires exclusively within marriage, and sustains familial cohesion. Monogamy, in this sense, shifts from a personal relational choice to a broader marker of ideological conformity and cultural loyalty (Banerjee 125-28).

Crucially, this ideological framework extends beyond rhetoric into regulatory practices. The 2021 digital media rules, which encourage platforms to monitor and restrict sexually explicit content, operate not only as instruments of obscenity control but also as mechanisms that delimit acceptable forms of intimacy (Banerjee 125–28). Within such a mediated environment, female desire is rendered legitimate primarily when it aligns with heteronormative expectations. The figure of the sexually autonomous woman—particularly one who disrupts the monogamous dyad—emerges as a site of intense anxiety, rendered simultaneously hyper-visible and delegitimised by the state.

This moral regulation permeates public discourse, where political rhetoric frequently mobilises the language of nationalism to frame non-normative sexualities as forms of cultural contamination. However, it would be reductive to locate this regulatory impulse solely within the political executive. The judiciary—while formally committed to constitutional principles—can reflect elements of this broader cultural logic, often articulating it through a liberal-legal vocabulary that maintains the status quo.

This tension is evident in *Joseph Shine v. Union of India*, where the Supreme Court decriminalised adultery and affirmed individual autonomy, yet simultaneously reiterated the centrality of marriage as a foundational social institution (*Joseph Shine v.*

Union of India). Such reasoning reveals a profound paradox within Indian jurisprudence: The language of rights and liberty often coexists with a subtle, yet persistent, reaffirmation of normative relational structures.

A similar ambivalence characterises the *Supriyo v. Union of India* decision declining to legalise same-sex marriage (*Supriyo v. Union of India*). While the Court acknowledged the inherent dignity of queer relationships, it deferred the matter to legislative authority, citing the importance of democratic process. This position contributes to the continued centrality of heteronormative frameworks within legal and cultural discourse. By situating the recognition of non-normative relationships outside the immediate scope of constitutional protection, such decisions illustrate the limits of liberal legality when confronted with prevailing social norms and the biopolitics of fidelity.

Law in this context appears to extend beyond mere adjudication, at times aligning with broader normative visions of intimacy that privilege marital stability, reproductive continuity, and familial order. What emerges is not a simple opposition between tradition and modernity, but a more complex entanglement in which legal institutions negotiate, rather than fully transcend, dominant cultural expectations regarding the “correct” expression of intimacy.

This dynamic becomes particularly visible in the treatment of women’s sexuality within legal processes. While courts may recognise live-in relationships, they often do so only when they approximate the structure and permanence of marriage. In family law disputes, a woman’s sexual history—manifested through digital communication or personal expression—continues to be mobilised as a marker of moral character (Banerjee 125–28). Legal reasoning in such instances frequently operates through implicit gendered assumptions: Male transgression is framed as episodic, whereas female sexual

autonomy is interpreted as indicative of fundamental moral failure.

This reflects a broader mode of governance in which the law operates not solely through rights, but through the moral evaluation of affect, attachment, and behaviour. It privileges forms of intimacy grounded in discipline and sacrifice, while rendering alternative relational arrangements suspect or inherently illegitimate.

Media functions within a parallel logic of regulation. Series like *Four More Shots Please!* or films like *Gehraiyaan* may appear to expand the representational space for female autonomy and sexual exploration (Nandy; Batra). However, these narratives frequently resolve through patterns of regret, punishment, or reintegration into normative structures. The sexually autonomous woman is often narratively disciplined, her transgression contained within a framework of eventual correction. Such patterns reflect a broader representational logic of permitted deviation, wherein cultural texts allow for temporary disruption only to ultimately restore the normative order.

This cyclical containment has significant implications, not only shaping what is visible but also constraining what is imaginable. Cultural producers internalise these boundaries, resulting in forms of self-regulation that pre-emptively limit narrative possibilities. In turn, the relative absence of diverse relational models reinforces institutional claims regarding the marginality or instability of non-normative intimacy, thereby sustaining a self-reinforcing cycle of cultural regulation.

Consensual non-monogamy, in this context, acquires political significance not merely as an alternative relational arrangement but as a reconfiguration of the underlying structure of intimacy itself. By decoupling commitment from exclusivity

and foregrounding principles of consent and transparency, it challenges the dyadic model that underpins both legal frameworks and cultural imaginaries. This has particular implications for women, whose emotional and sexual labour has historically been organised around ideals of sacrifice and fidelity (Hardy and Easton 1–15; Sheff 252–55).

It is essential, however, not to romanticise non-monogamy as inherently emancipatory. Its transformative potential remains contingent upon structural conditions, including class privilege and social acceptance. Nevertheless, in a context where women's intimate lives are subject to persistent surveillance by family and state, non-monogamy represents a meaningful site of resistance to coercive norms.

In this light, one may draw on Lauren Berlant's notion of intimate publics (Berlant 1-15) to understand how alternative forms of belonging circulate beyond the traditional family. Similarly, Sara Ahmed's critique of compulsory happiness (Ahmed 27-49) highlights how non-normative relational choices disrupt not only social conventions but also state-sanctioned affective ideals.

Ultimately, non-monogamy in the Indian context cannot be reduced to a private lifestyle choice. It must be understood as a contested terrain where personal autonomy, cultural norms, and institutional power intersect. The experiences of non-monogamous women reveal not a complete rupture from existing structures, but an ongoing negotiation within them—exposing the profound possibilities and limits of intimacy under conditions of cultural governance.

Case Study I

This exploratory analysis focuses on Participant A, a pansexual female aged 24–29 from an elite urban milieu. Holding a Master's degree in English Literature and possessing a

professional background in pedagogy and digital content creation, her trajectory toward non-monogamy was facilitated by a synthesis of personal relational history and sustained engagement with diverse media narratives encountered during her academic tenure. Having navigated both monogamous and polyamorous frameworks, she currently engages in casual dating following the termination of a long-term partnership.

Participant A's orientation toward relational plurality is anchored in a critique of the monogamous dyad, which she perceives as insufficient for fulfilling the complete spectrum of intellectual, affective, and physical needs. While she identifies this perspective as increasingly prevalent among educated, urban youth, she acknowledges the inherent tension between her choices and the dominant social scripts upheld by older generations. This generational dissonance, characterised by the conflation of non-monogamy with moral laxity or infidelity, underscores how acceptance remains unevenly distributed and stratified along parameters of age, education, and cultural exposure.

A central theme in Participant A's narrative is the arduous management of emotional labour, particularly concerning the negotiation of jealousy. Identifying this as a recurring disruption within same-sex male dynamics, her primary coping mechanism involves emotional detachment or the dissolution of the arrangement. Such responses illuminate the extent to which non-monogamy demands not merely an ideological rejection of exclusivity, but an intensive commitment to reflexivity. Rather than an inherently liberatory state, her experience reveals the constant negotiation required to sustain alternative intimate forms within a hostile social environment.

Regarding societal perception, Participant A emphasises the persistence of moral surveillance despite the expansion of representational visibility. Although she navigates a degree of

acceptance within her immediate peer group, she maintains a strategic silence regarding her intimate life within her kinship structures. This selective disclosure reflects a broader biopolitics of intimacy, wherein non-monogamous individuals must calibrate their visibility to navigate anticipated judgment and the enduring stigma attached to non-normative desires.

Media representation serves as a pivotal agent in Participant A's self-construction, acting as a site for both normalisation and awareness. However, she offers a critical analysis of mainstream media's ideological duality, noting its tendency toward polarised portrayals that either romanticise relational plurality or pathologise it as a site of moral deficiency and instability. She cites the character of Veronica in *Cocktail* as a representative trope, where female autonomy is narratively disciplined and ultimately subordinated to the reassertion of conventional monogamous norms (Adajania).

Furthermore, Participant A recognises the subconscious influence of media in structuring internal expectations and internalised norms. While she does not view these narratives as direct determinants of behaviour, she acknowledges their subtle role in delimiting the imaginable. She distinguishes between the containment of mainstream media and the relative validation offered by social media platforms, which function as more supportive spaces for the circulation of alternative relational models. This distinction highlights the multiplicity of media environments and their varied impact on the construction of non-monogamous identities.

Crucially, Participant A frames her participation in non-monogamy as a mechanism of personal empowerment, asserting her sovereignty to define the terms of her relationships and resist the patriarchal mandate of permanence. This autonomy represents a radical refusal of gender norms that prescribe emotional and sexual restraint for women. However, this

empowerment is never absolute; it remains a contested terrain, perpetually negotiated within a socio-cultural context that continues to privilege the biopolitics of fidelity and heteronormative control.

Analytically, Participant A's experience exemplifies the central thesis of this study. Media representations of non-monogamy operate through a profound ambivalence, simultaneously enabling and constraining female agency. Her account illustrates how media-generated imaginaries of relational freedom coexist with entrenched social regulation, creating a fragmented experiential landscape. While global media flows facilitate the articulation of alternative possibilities, they do not dismantle the structural conditions that limit their realisation, compelling individuals to navigate the tension between visibility and legitimacy.

In conclusion, this case study reveals that non-monogamous subjectivities are not merely adopted but are actively constructed through the interplay of media discourse, social constraint, and personal reflexivity (Sheff 252–55). Participant A's reflections provide a nuanced perspective on the lived realities of non-monogamous women in urban India, highlighting how aspirations for autonomy are inextricably intertwined with the persistent structures of regulation and the gruelling labour of relational negotiation.

Case Study II

This exploratory analysis shifts its focus to Participant B, a heterosexual male aged 24 to 29 situated within a middle-class urban environment. Currently single, his intellectual background includes a Bachelor's degree in Psychology, complemented by professional experience in information technology and creative pursuits in music and writing. His trajectory toward non-monogamy was facilitated by a synthesis of diverse media flows,

ranging from literature and sitcoms to digital platforms, which functioned as a catalyst for initial curiosity and a subsequent investigation into alternative relational frameworks.

Participant B's orientation toward relational plurality is anchored in a desire to challenge the hegemony of conventional scripts. While initially unfamiliar with such arrangements, his perspective gradually evolved into a more favourable view, perceiving non-monogamy as offering an expanded spectrum for intellectual, affective, and physical fulfillment. This trajectory underscores the role of media not merely as a passive source of information, but as an active agent in reimagining the parameters of the imaginable, particularly among the educated, urban youth.

Simultaneously, Participant B's narrative reveals a profound ideological ambivalence regarding the long-term sustainability of non-monogamous structures. He identifies the gruelling emotional labour and the complexity of managing multiple relational dynamics as significant disruptions, expressing skepticism regarding their viability and citing a perceived high rate of failure. This tension illuminates the dissonance between the aspirational appeal of non-monogamy and the practical difficulties of its enactment, suggesting that engagement with such forms is perpetually negotiated through uncertainty and reflexivity.

Regarding societal perception, Participant B observes a generational divide characterised by the same dissonance identified in earlier case studies. While younger populations exhibit a degree of openness, non-monogamy remains a stigmatised practice within traditional social contexts, frequently pathologised as taboo. He emphasises that while these structures offer a level of individual sovereignty not found in the monogamous dyad, this autonomy is disciplined by persistent moral surveillance and the risk of judgment. Consequently,

participation requires a strategic calibration between personal desire and social acceptability.

Media representation serves as a pivotal, albeit contested, site in Participant B's self-construction. He critiques mainstream portrayals for their superficiality, noting a tendency toward polarised depictions that prioritise sensationalism and sexual transgression over ethical complexity. This critique aligns with the broader observation that media production is frequently governed by commercial imperatives and viewership, resulting in dramatised narratives that prioritise spectacle over the painstaking work of negotiation and mutual respect.

A significant dimension of his analysis concerns the gendered double standards inherent in these representations. Participant B argues that media narratives frequently favour men while positioning women in non-monogamous relationships in a less sympathetic light, often reducing them to objects of desire lacking emotional density. This observation points to the persistence of androcentric scripts that reinforce reductive stereotypes, even within narratives that ostensibly challenge traditional norms. Such depictions reveal the limits of visibility when it remains embedded within patriarchal hierarchies.

He further reflects on the formative influence of media consumption during adolescence, acknowledging its subtle role in structuring internal expectations and a willingness to experiment with alternative relational forms. This underscores the role of media as an agent in the production of social meanings, contributing to the development of values and behavioural orientations related to intimacy. By delimiting what is imaginable, these narratives participate in the broader governance of intimate life during critical stages of socialisation.

Looking ahead, Participant B anticipates a gradual expansion in social acceptance, driven by continued media

visibility and public discourse (Nhalungo). However, he maintains that such a shift is contingent upon the development of more balanced and nuanced narratives. In his view, authentic portrayals that move beyond superficial spectacle are essential for dismantling the biopolitics of fidelity and fostering a more empathetic, inclusive, and equitable social discourse regarding non-monogamous choices.

Analytically, Participant B's account complements the insights derived from Participant A, reinforcing the central thesis of this study. While both recognise the normalising potential of media, Participant B places greater emphasis on its distortive tendencies and the ideological duality that defines representational containment. His reflections illustrate how media imaginaries not only shape individual curiosity but also reproduce the gendered hierarchies and misconceptions that structure societal responses to non-normative intimacy.

Together, these observations confirm that media operates as a site of profound ambivalence, simultaneously enabling visibility while delimiting the terms of legitimacy through selective and gendered representation. Participant B's experience demonstrates how individuals internalise, negotiate, and contest these representations, revealing the complex interplay between media discourse, personal agency, and the enduring structures of social regulation in the construction of contemporary intimate life.

Conclusion

This exploratory study highlights the complex and controversial issues urban Indian women face when engaging in non-monogamous relationships. The study shows that visibility alone does not lead to real liberation but that it examines the connection between global media portrayals, long-standing social and legal systems, and individual experiences. A deep

ideological duality exists in how contemporary mass media operates. On one hand, it helps normalise various perspectives on female agency, transparency, and relationship diversity, allowing people to question traditional, heteronormative narratives about sexuality though, on the other hand, mainstream media uses androcentric frames, selective visibility based on class, and narrative closure that often limits non-monogamous identities.

A widespread “biopolitics of fidelity” adds to this representational conflict in India as the state promotes traditional marriage stability and female self-sacrifice as key elements of national integrity and moral order. This is evident in political rhetoric and majoritarian cultural ideology. Legal institutions display a structural doubt that supports heteropatriarchal family structures and regulates female sexual expression and this continues despite significant legal changes, such as the *Joseph Shine v. Union of India* case that expanded personal autonomy. Any deviation from monogamous relationships faces systematic exclusion, moral scrutiny, and ongoing social stigma due to this pervasive culture of censorship (*Joseph Shine v. Union of India*).

As the qualitative insights from the study reveal, a fragmented and subjective context shapes how urban individuals practice non-monogamy. Non-monogamy becomes a constant negotiation that requires emotional labour, strategic concealment within kinship dynamics, and ongoing psychological clashes with ingrained social norms and it is not simply an easy path to liberation. Ultimately, the study calls for cultural producers and public discussions to move beyond androcentric, reductionist ideas as there is a need to validate consensual non-monogamy as a legitimate form of interpersonal form. To foster an egalitarian social dialogue, we must recognise the complex realities of intimacy, autonomy, and power that exist within the modern Indian psyche through nuanced and detailed narratives.

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