Representation of Women in Female-Directed Bollywood Films

Maya Ford and Riya Nair

Rebecca Peters, PhD Candidate

College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Religion

FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

FSU UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY PROGRAM
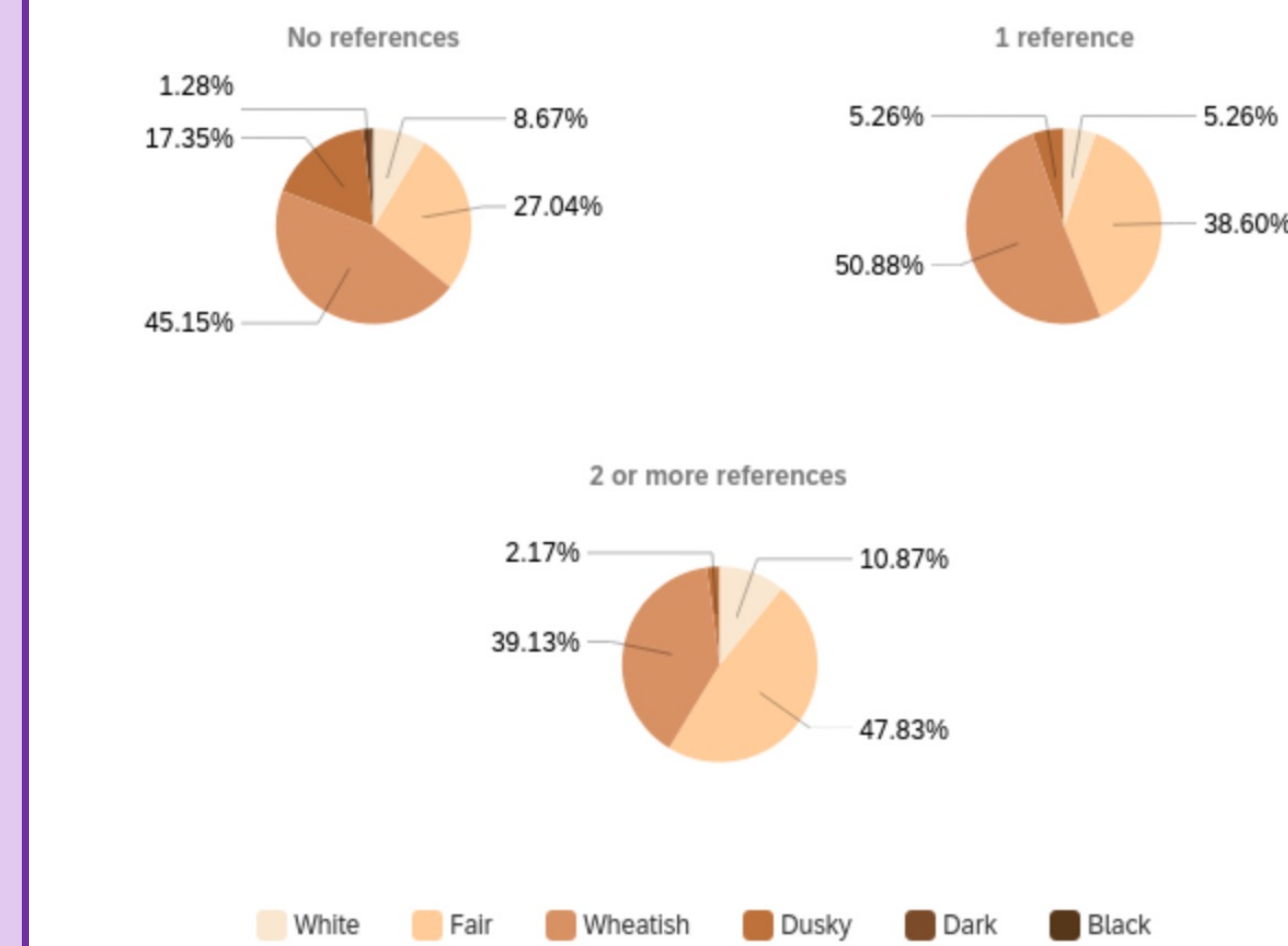CENTER FOR UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH & ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT

Abstract:

One main way that cultural expectations and social norms are depicted in society is through film. Women are often depicted differently in movies depending on the gender of the director. To understand this phenomenon, this project analyzes women characters in women-directed films from Bollywood, the commercial film industry in India. Gender roles in Bollywood films are defined by the Indian culture, religion, and social norms. The goal of this study is to collect qualitative and quantitative data that may provide more information on how cultural expectations are portrayed in films produced by female directors. This project uses survey coding to determine types and frequency of female representation. Each female character within the films is examined in aspects including clothing, religion, relationships, education, and taboo behavior and are coded accordingly into the system. As undergraduate research assistants, we are trained to accurately code the data from each female character in each film into Qualtrics surveys. We are put into groups of at least two research assistants to ensure each character is coded more than once. After inputting the data, we compare survey answers to ensure the most correct data is being submitted. This project is still at its initial stages; therefore, we do not have conclusive results. However, we can begin to see trends across the films we have finished coding. Further research is necessary to better understand how women are being represented in Bollywood films, directed by women, because it provides insight into how women are perceived in India.
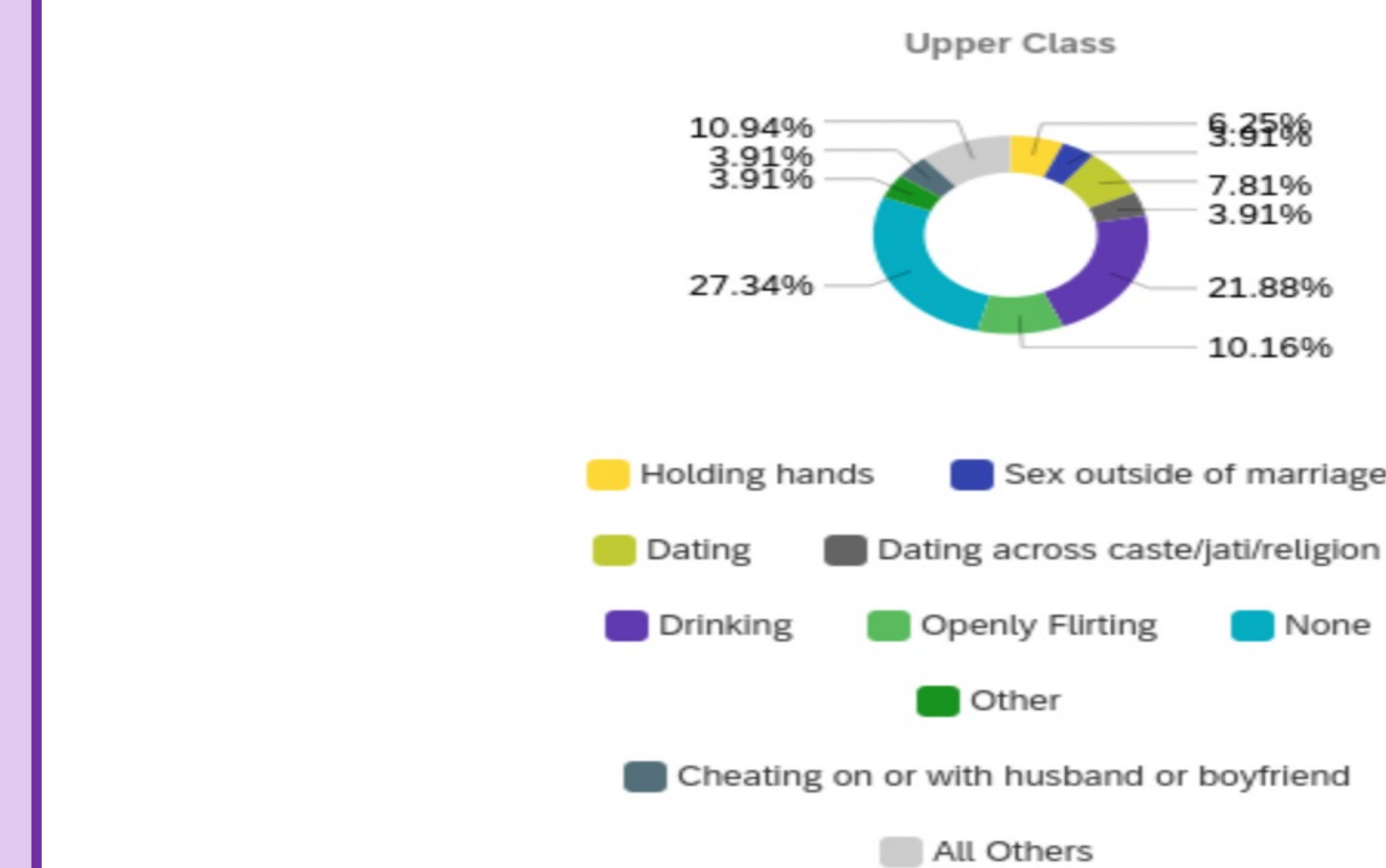
Introduction:

Bollywood, the Hindi-language version of Hollywood, is India's largest film industry. Specifically, we are analyzing Bollywood films produced from 1998 to today. Generally, Bollywood films portray men and women according to the strict gender roles they exhibit in their society. Due to this, the portrayal of female characters, specifically, tends to indicate the way women are viewed in the real world as well. This study focuses on how female characters are portrayed in films directed by women. For example, a study investigating the shift in the representation of women in Bollywood films over the span of a decade found that, while there has been a slight shift in the way female characters are portrayed, there is still a strong message that women are more likely to be respected when they conform to the gender norms (Khan 2018). This study still leaves the question, "How is the representation of female characters in Bollywood films impacted by having a female producer"? This study looks at what role women directors may have in helping to change the common portrayal of women.
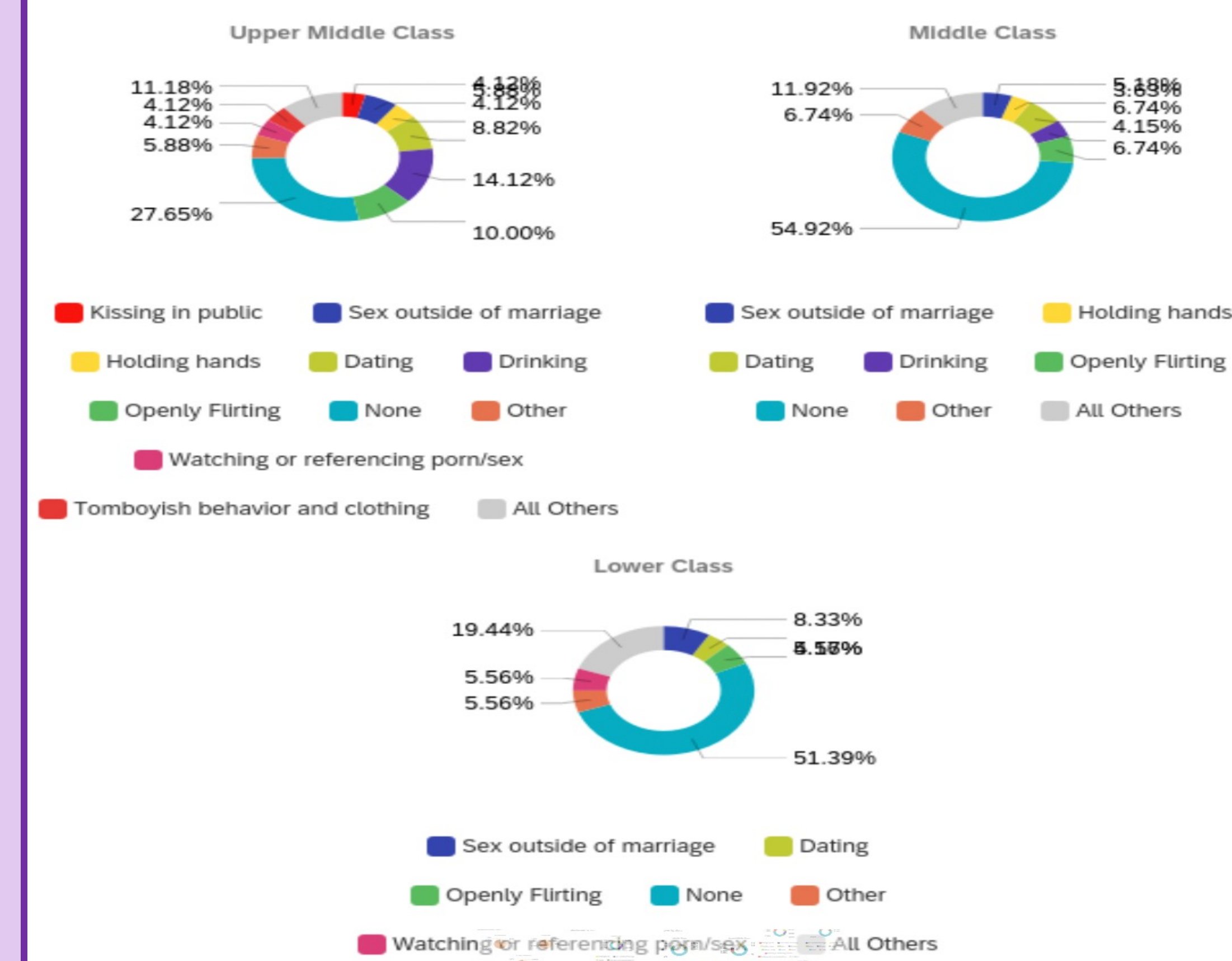

Attractiveness by Color (No references, 1 reference, 2 or more references) — pie charts with legend: White, Fair, Wheatish, Dusky, Dark, Black

Taboo behavior by class — Upper Class donut chart. Legend: Holding hands, Sex outside of marriage, Dating, Dating across caste/jati/religion, Drinking, Openly Flirting, None, Other, Cheating on or with husband or boyfriend, All Others

Taboo behavior by class — Upper Middle Class, Middle Class, and Lower Class donut charts with legends

Methods:

In this study, we are using qualitative and quantitative analyses of about 40 Bollywood films collected through Qualtrics Surveys. Each coder (undergraduate research assistant) watches a film and makes notes of each speaking female character's demographics and certain behaviors. Many of these demographics include skin color, religion, caste, employment, etc., and the behaviors include their relationships with other women, taboo behavior, physical appearance, etc. We use these aspects to provide a view of how each of these characters were represented. Each coder then puts these answers into a Qualtrics Survey, which is then compared to another coders survey to ensure accurate results for each character during our weekly meetings with our research mentor. After verifying the data, final reviews and edits are performed to ensure there are no discrepancies in data. Once all data is collected, it is run through a system to allow for comparison of different results and how they impact each other.

Results and Discussion:

Though we have not coded all the films in this study yet, there are some preliminary trends that have become clear in the films that have been coded. These trends are centered around the gendered behaviors exhibited and attractiveness by skin color. For example, fair-skinned women were more often referred to as attractive compared to that of wheatish women and darker-skinned women. This represents the racial inequalities still prevalent today and demonstrates how they are still enforced through the film industry (Peters 2021).

Additionally, the preliminary results have shown that Taboo Behavior increased as the class of the women increased. For instance, women in the upper class were more likely to participate in Taboo Behavior such as drinking, openly flirting, and dating. This shows the cultural norms in India where women with more money and indirectly more power, are more confident and comfortable with displaying socially unacceptable behavior.

Clearly, this is still an area in which Bollywood can improve upon regarding the way female characters are represented. As seen with the results, there are clear discrepancies in India with how women are portrayed in their skin color and their class level. Further research needs to be conducted to see how to improve the portrayal of women fairly by watching more films.

Resources:

Khan, Subuhi, and Laramie D. Taylor. "Gender Policing in Mainstream Hindi Cinema: A Decade of Central Female Characters in Top-Grossing Bollywood Movies." *International Journal of Communication 12*, 7 Jan. 2018.

Peters, Rebecca. "Colorism, Casteism, and Gentrification in Bollywood" *The Jugaad Project: Material Religion in Context.* 24, February 2021. Online Journal. Open Access.